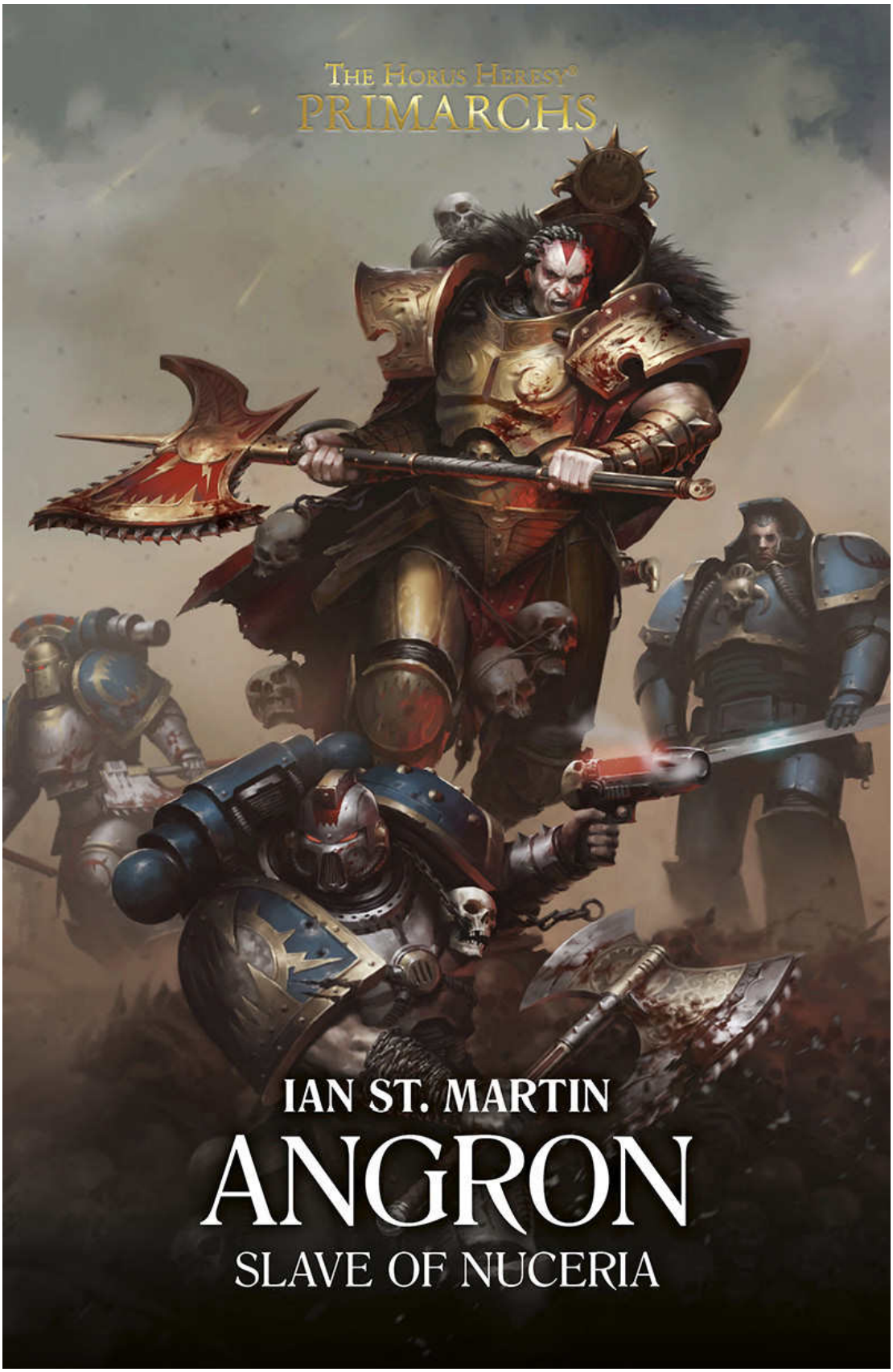
THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS

IAN ST. MARTIN

# ANGRON

## SLAVE OF NUCERIA


THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS
IAN ST. MARTIN
ANGRON
SLAVE OF NUCERIA

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*The Primarchs*

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**VULKAN: LORD OF DRAKES**

**JAGHATAI KHAN: WARHAWK OF CHOGORIS**

**FERRUS MANUS: GORGON OF MEDUSA**

**FULGRIM: THE PALATINE PHOENIX**

**LORGAR: BEARER OF THE WORD**

**PERTURABO: THE HAMMER OF OLYMPIA**

**MAGNUS THE RED: MASTER OF PROSPERO**

**LEMAN RUSS: THE GREAT WOLF**

**ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN: LORD OF ULTRAMAR**

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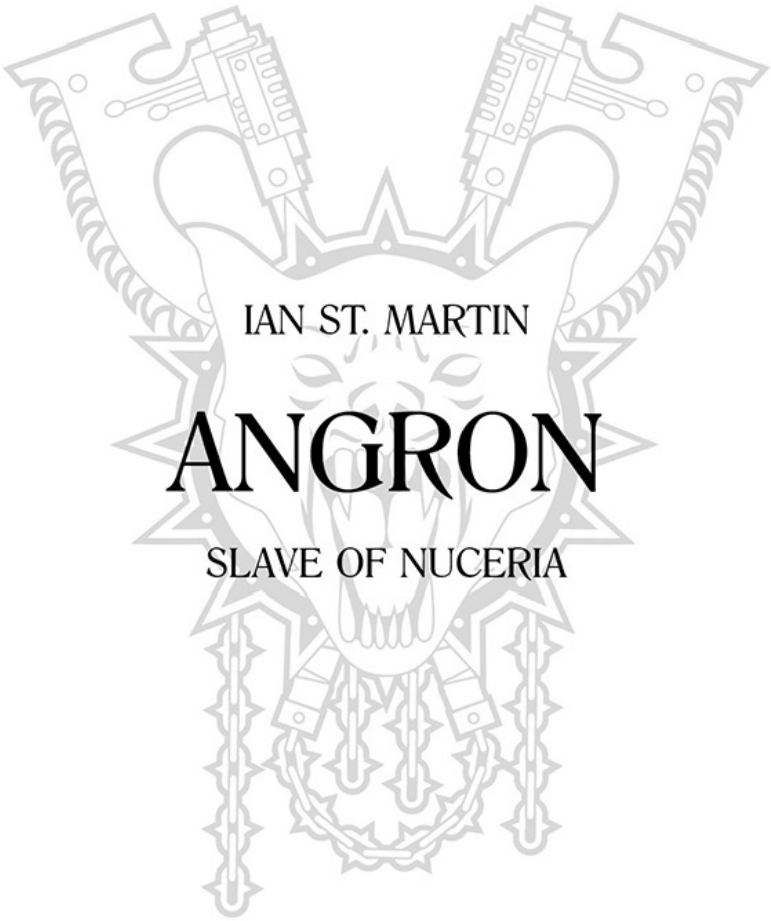

IAN ST. MARTIN

# ANGRON

## SLAVE OF NUCERIA

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**THE HORUS HERESY**

***It is a time of legend.***

**Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Mankind conquer the stars in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races are to be smashed by his elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.**

**The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons. Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor, as system after system is brought back under his control. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful champions.**

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# ~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

***The Primarchs***

ANGRON, Primarch of the World Eaters

***The XII Legion, 'World Eaters'***

MAGO, Centurion of the 18th Company

ORONTES, First Axe of the 18th Company

ASTAKOS, Standard Bearer of the 18th Company

HANNO, *Dimachurias* of the 18th Company

SALICAR, Warrior of the 18th Company

KAEPTRA, 'The Red', Centurion of the 37th Company

GHOSS, Sergeant of the 85th Company

DELVARUS, Sergeant of the 44th Company

KAURAGAR, Centurion of the 21st Company

VAION, Apothecary of the 18th Company

KORIT, Techmarine of the 18th Company

VORIAS, Lectio Primus of the Librarius Division

TETHYS, Lexicanum of the Librarius Division

IOCARE, Codicier of the Librarius Division

KHÂRN, Centurion of the Eighth Assault Company and Equerry to the Primarch

LHORKE, 'The First' Dreadnought, Contemptor-Pattern

GAHLAN SURLAK, Apothecary

***The Martian Mechanicum***

VEL-KHEREDAR, Magos

***Non-Imperial Personae***

OHNA, of the Many

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# PROLOGUE

## THREE DAYS

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*‘O, that our fathers would applaud our love*
*To seal our happiness with their consents!’*

– attributed to the Nameless Thane of Old Albia

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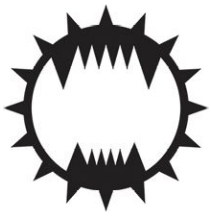

Across a lifetime that spanned more than a century, there existed three days that, to Iocare's mind, were fundamental in the shaping of his destiny. The first had come on Terra, when he was a child on the cusp of becoming a man. Such a fate would be denied forever to him that day, as he was taken from the world he knew, and placed within that of the Legion.

The second day had come many years later, after extensive conditioning, surgeries and genetic restructuring had moulded Iocare into something that was no longer human, but rather the weapon humanity would wield to conquer the stars. Decades of fitful, sleepless nights, the persistent whispers of those around him that only he could hear, the unexplained pain that wracked him and set him apart from his Legion kin; all was made clear when he was inducted into the Librarius of the XII Legion, the War Hounds, where he was trained to fashion what he had called a curse into a gift, and then a weapon.

And then there was the third day, the last of the days that would close off

who Iocare had been and change him into what destiny would have him become. As he walked through the decks of the *Hound's Tooth*, feeling the minds of thousands of beings around him like the lapping tides of a churning sea, the Librarian's brutal, slab-like features were creased in an honest smile.

That third day was today.

Iocare's brethren of the 18th Company's Librarius awaited him as he arrived at the *Hound's Tooth*'s principal apothecarion. Their faces were stoic, almost cold as their eyes followed his approach. Yet they did not need their faces or their words to converse amongst their order. Iocare reached out to them, brushing his mind softly against each of theirs. He felt confusion in some, anger in others. And in some, though they would never admit it, Iocare sensed the barest admiration, tightly guarded within the hardened layers of their mental wards.

Iocare knew their concerns. He understood them. He knew why so many viewed him as foolish, even suicidal. Every XII Legion warrior, no longer War Hounds but now the Eaters of Worlds, who had undergone the procedure had died. No one, Librarian or otherwise, had taken the Butcher's Nails into the meat of his mind and lived.

But he would.

The coalition of the Legion's finest Apothecaries and Techmarines had laboured without rest since the discovery of their primarch to replicate the neural implants present in their lord as he had demanded. Design after design, prototype after proto-type, all had failed. Even the intervention of Vel-Kheredar, the prodigious magos of sacred Mars, had yet to produce a viable replication of the Nails. Until, it was hoped, now.

A scattering of Iocare's Legion kin had gathered to observe the procedure, arranging themselves in loose rows around the wide banks of armourglass outside the apothecarion. Their expressions were guarded, or hidden behind the marble-white faceplates of their helms. Iocare could sense the curiosity within his brothers, the expectation bleeding off their auras like a haze.

The company's centurion, however, was nowhere to be found. Mago's absence was felt by all those present, a stark indication of his dissent against the transformation that Iocare was poised to undertake. Where the commander of the 18th saw recklessness and fatalistic folly, Iocare saw destiny. He saw the fulfilment of what their primarch demanded, that his sons be remade in his image. Iocare would become the bridge between the

Legion and their lord, the father that refused to look at them as they were now. Especially those of the Librarius.

Iocare would make their father see his Legion. He would make Angron see *him*.

Reclined upon the cold surface of the surgical slab, Iocare watched with calm as a team of medicae servitors removed his armour and bound his limbs and torso with thick adamantium restraints. Their caution was a product of experience, as well as necessity. Despite the procedure having undergone countless iterations of design and implementation, the effect upon the subject was never the same, apart from death. None within the Legion knew exactly what would happen when this newest iteration of the Butcher's Nails was implanted.

Orchestrating the lobotomised slaves were representatives from both the Legion's Techmarines and Apothecaries. Gahlan Surlak, who had taken the creation of a viable reproduction of the Nails as his own personal crusade, was absent, watching through the eyes of the servitors as he toiled alongside Vel-Kheredar on the newly rechristened *Conqueror*.

Working in silence, the servitors quickly sheared Iocare's head to the scalp and marked points of incision across his skull, all under the careful supervision of the Librarian's specialised kin. His restraints were checked, and then checked again. A heavy brace was installed on either side of his head and neck to lock it into place. With the preliminary actions completed, the Apothecary Vaion came to Iocare's side, the chamber's harsh, sterile light gleaming from his ivory plate.

'I am able to administer a sedative,' said Vaion, raising his narthecium gauntlet and its array of injectors, 'to render you unconscious, or apply a nerve block to the affected areas. It will not impact the implantation.'

'No.' Iocare met his brother's gaze as he refused him.

'There will be a considerable amount of pain,' said Vaion.

Iocare turned his eyes back to the ceiling. He answered in Nagrakali, the guttural tongue quickly supplanting Low Gothic as those born of Terra became increasingly outnumbered in the Legion's ranks. 'Pain is the purpose of the Butcher's Nails. Pain is what made the primarch who he is. If the Legion is to succeed in forging unity with him, then it will be forged through pain.'

Vaion gave a slow nod of acquiescence. 'As you wish, Codicier.' The

Apothecary looked to Korit, and stepped aside as the Techmarine took his place, the specialised tools of his back-mounted servo arms thrumming as they came online. Iocare brushed against the thoughts of his kindred. Caution warred with expectation across Vaion's aura, where a clinical calm permeated Korit's.

'Are you prepared?' asked Korit, his voice harshened by the grille of his snarling crimson helm.

Iocare closed his eyes, took a slow breath, and then opened them again. 'Bring forth the hammer, my brother.'

Vaion affixed his helm in place with a soft snap of magnetising seals. He turned to one of the tables surrounding the surgical slab, passing over the trays of neatly arranged instruments before stopping before an armoured box slightly larger than a legionary's head. The Apothecary's fingers tapped against the runes of the crate's access panel, applying gene-code samples and disabling the array of security failsafes ensuring the contents arrived upon the *Hound's Tooth* without any chance of being tampered with. As the final lock cycled open, Vaion turned to Korit and waited.

A shadow fell across Iocare's face as the Techmarine loomed over him, a giant of deep-red armour framed by buzzing mechanical limbs and twitching mechadendrites. The restrained aura coating Korit's mind crystallised into absolute focus in Iocare's second sight as he made ready for the first incision. A beam of emerald light leapt out from the cluster of lenses on the left side of Korit's helm, perfectly aligning the movement of his foremost servo arms to the path of the targeting laser as it settled over the Librarian's brow.

'We shall now proceed,' rumbled Korit. 'Mark the time.'

'Acknowledged,' replied Vaion. The sound of a surgical saw spinning to life eclipsed all sound within the apothecarion.

The sharp buzzing whine of the saw tickled at Iocare's inner ear. As it made contact with his flesh, the sound grew lower, softer, wetter. His left eye twitched as a fine mist of his own blood dappled his face. The air was filled with the hot metallic richness of transhuman vitality. The initial sting of the cut came and went, overtaken by a migraine grind as the mono-molecular cutting blade sliced its way through genhanced muscle and ate into the World Eater's reinforced skull.

Previous prototypes of the Nails had run the gamut of entry points for affixing the implants to the subject's brain. Substantial progress had been

made with a model that had attached itself at the temples, but it had been discarded with the others after once more it had ended in failure, and more dead or blood-maddened World Eaters had been cast into the incinerators of the 203rd Expeditionary Fleet.

The iteration being tested on Iocare was a wholly new concept, a fan-like curve of dark iron and snaking sub-dermal connectors designed to be clamped over the front of the brow like a crown. Vaion lifted the device from its container, bringing it beside the table as Korit withdrew his saw-tipped servo arm, dripping with dark Legiones Astartes blood.

‘Principal incision complete,’ said Korit flatly. ‘Prepare for installation.’

Vaion leaned over Iocare, his hands working in an ordered dance. The flesh around the incision was pulled clear and pinned back, with any excess blood suctioned away by a tool in the Apothecary’s gauntlet. Time was a factor, due to a Space Marine’s rapid healing ability, and so they worked swiftly. Vaion reached for a table beside him, turning back to the slab with a glittering steel spreader in each hand. He pressed the instruments into the wide fissure carved into the Codicier’s skull, locking them into place before ratcheting them to slowly stretch the opening wider. Transhuman bone creaked as it was pulled apart, exposing the glistening pinkish-grey mass of Iocare’s brain.

The pain escalated, a white-hot bloom starting at his brow and cascading down his entire being. A legionary’s transhuman physique was designed to curb such trauma, dulling even the most catastrophic of injuries. Even without the systems of his power armour, Iocare’s body could secrete chemical pain suppressants and combat narcotics directly into his bloodstream, numbing his nerves and keeping the warrior’s focus on the fight.

Iocare prevented such reactions from occurring, with a will born of an inhuman discipline and control over his body. The Librarian took in all of the agonised sensation, allowing it to slash across his nervous system in jagged waves. He relished it as a kind of purifying torment, one that would push him from one state of being into the next.

‘Installation site prepared to optimum specifications,’ murmured Vaion as he took up the Nails in his hands. ‘Proceed with first phase of device installation.’

Korit extended a mechadendrite from his helm towards the Butcher’s Nails, its trio of probes slotting into the device’s connection ports with a

series of sharp clicks. The implant seemed to come alive then, with tiny lights winking in silent sequence along its length, and the sub-dermal connectors dangling from it snapping taut under the Techmarine's control.

Vaion lowered the Nails over Iocare's skull, just shy of touching it. Korit lifted his left hand, the wrist rotating and the fingers making short, sharp movements in the air. The connectors moved in concert to his haptic control, each needle-tipped cable settling over an exact spot of Iocare's brain before plunging down into the meat.

With the human brain bereft of pain receptors, the Librarian was unable to feel the connectors as they wound through his grey matter, yet still their effects were made known. Tics and spasms played across Iocare's face. His limbs trembled and twitched in a disjointed dance, involuntarily straining against the bands holding him to the slab. His senses came and went in quick, split-second snatches of blindness, numbness and bizarre smells he had never before experienced.

Slowly, carefully, Vaion let the connectors pull the Butcher's Nails further down as they wove deeper, until finally the device slotted into the cranial incision with a wet *snick*. He removed the spreaders, allowing Iocare's skull to grip the implants as he hurriedly unpinned the flesh and sutured it around them. A chill pebbled Iocare with gooseflesh as the Apothecary sprayed his swollen brow with a frigid counterseptic spray.

Korit's hand grew still as each of the connectors arrived at its destination, fully embedded within Iocare's brain. With a miniscule cock of his head, he shunted operational power of the Nails from his armour to its own internal source, and after performing a battery of diagnostics in the time it took an eye to blink, he severed connection to his mechadendrite and withdrew it back to his helm.

Long minutes stretched by in silence, save for the chattering of medicae cogitators and the ever present rumble of the ship's engines. The joints in Iocare's fingers crackled as his hands tightened into fists, the World Eater seeking to assert control over his still-convulsing body with a legionary's discipline.

Iocare felt his mind changing, realigning to achieve fulfilment of union with the Lord of the Red Sands. Something new was within him, less a presence than a blunt, base sensation that coated his being and seeped into his very core. A sudden warmth filled him, starting from within his skull and radiating out through every part of him. It grew hotter, and hotter, until

every vein stung with it. It set his teeth on edge, and he bit down as he ground them together.

His eyes, threaded with straining blood vessels, flitted between Vaion and Korit in a rapidly sharpening glare. He drank in the uncertainty permeating their auras, stopping when the pain it sparked behind his eyes grew too much to bear. He didn't need his gift to see how they were looking at him. The doubt – the fear – in their eyes. Fear of *him*. As if he were a bomb and they did not know whether or not he would explode.

Watching him.

Staring at him.

*Judging* him.

*–tick–*

It was so easy for his brothers to lord over him, while he lay there with his limbs bound. So confident in their superiority. So arrogant! Where was their courage when the time to test the Nails had come? Where were *they* when Angron had called, and none save Iocare had answered?

*–tick-tick–*

Iocare's jaw worked in silence, no longer in pain, but in anger. An unfathomable rage lashed through his veins, beyond any he had ever known. This was a new fury, black and red-tinged and endless like a ragged maw rising out of the deepest depths of him.

*–tick-tick-tick–*

Was this the anger his father felt? The towering rage that had razed whole worlds and spilled oceans of hot, vital blood? Iocare was forced to abandon the thought, as the buzzing in his mind bleached it of all meaning and importance. Nothing mattered, nothing but the restraints holding him down, and what he would do once he tore loose from them.

*–tick-tick-tick-tick-tick–*

His lungs clenched in spasm, unable to take in air. The shadows on the walls of the apothecarion lengthened and twisted, reflecting the psychic flame rushing over his flesh.

Vaion and Korit were moving now. Iocare knew they were shouting, that the sterile white and silence was now stained red by alarms, but he couldn't hear any of it. All sound was gone save the primal roar of his blood and the insistent–

*–tick-tick-tick–*

*–tick-tick-tick–*

*–TICK-TICK-TICK–*

Iocare couldn’t hear himself screaming. Such was the ruination bursting out from inside him that he didn’t realise he was doing it, and he could not have stopped even if he had wanted to. He didn’t stop screaming when ropes of bleeding fire tore from his flesh, unspooling and slashing uncontrollably around the apothecarion as the bands of adamantium restraining him came apart at a molecular level.

Korit was dead before Iocare realised he had touched him. Vaion lasted a heart’s beat longer, torn apart into separate mounds of burning ash so quickly he hadn’t even had a chance to cry out in pain. Iocare watched his brothers disappear, dying without any *blood* to coat the walls or his hands or his teeth and he screamed so loudly the muscles in his throat tore.

Iocare brought his hands to his face but they weren’t flesh any more. They were fire rippling around bones, blazing in sickly multicolour. His scream became part of them as the conflagration grew, burning brighter and brighter, destroying everything around him, until he ceased to be.

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# PART ONE

## THIRTY-ONE HOURS

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*‘Dorn made builders, and Magnus thinkers. Guilliman raised bureaucrats, while Lorgar made priests and the Khan vagrants. Of all the Legions, we are the only ones who are exactly what the Emperor wanted, all that the Legiones Astartes were ever meant to be.*

*Conquerors.*

*We aren’t meant for the world that is coming, the new world that will rise from the ashes.*

*We are only meant to burn this one down.’*

– attributed to Gheer,
Master of the War Hounds Legion

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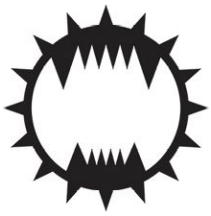

# ONE

It was upon a long-abandoned disc of void-hardened silver, glittering from where it perched over the curve of a slowly turning world, that the representatives of two civilisations would meet, and the fate of that world would be determined.

One side of the summit had appeared out of the fury of a silent storm: a massive fleet of dozens upon dozens of brutal warships, their armoured hulls lacquered in clean white edged with deep blue and bristling with countless weapons batteries. They had torn themselves loose from a rupture in the mat-erial universe, the incredible violence of their arrival made all the more alarming by the numbing silence of the void. Emerging as though vomited out by the warp itself, the fleet quickly took shape, congealing into a practised, regimented order as smaller vessels and squadrons of nimble escort craft aligned themselves within the shadows of the great leviathans holding pride of place at the centre of their formation.

Auspex and deep-range scanner sweeps slashed out in ripping arcs from

the newcomers, invisible nets cast by the commanders of each warship to draw in and consume every iota of data available to them about their surroundings. Information about the system and its lone habitable world was scarce, beyond the basest of surveys conducted decades before when the planet had first been rediscovered. Designated as Ninety-Three Fifteen, the fifteenth world rendered compliant by the Ninety-Third Expeditionary Fleet, the world had been brought into the fold of the Emperor's realm without bloodshed. With no need for their blades, its conquerors had departed Ninety-Three Fifteen once an Imperial regency had been installed to rule it and integrate it into the wider Imperium.

Contact with that regent had ceased, with neither word nor tithe reaching distant Terra for more than fifteen standard Solar years. Such was the monumental scale of man's continually expanding dominion that such a length of time had passed before the Throneworld had taken notice. The call went out, the task of investigation given to whichever of the Legion expeditionary fleets was nearest. Terra demanded that the source of Ninety-Three Fifteen's silence be ascertained, be it calamity or treachery.

So it would be, then, either by fate or the dark intervention of some higher being, that the XII Legion, the Eaters of Worlds, would answer.

Of the other half of the meeting, there was no sign. No emissaries presented themselves, bowing and scraping before the bladed might of the Legiones Astartes, seeking to spare themselves a Legion's wrath. No defence fleet pickets darted out from high orbit, the vox-net alive with cries of defiance and demands to live free of the Emperor's rule. There was life on the planet below, abundant, vibrant and advanced, though the only hint of its intentions had been seen in the dreams of the fleet's astropaths.

Every node of the Imperium's stellar communications network serving in the choirs throughout the armada had experienced the same rapid vision. As subjective and idiosyncratic as the art of astropathy was, the ability to convey a singular message across an entire fleet of souls spoke of a psychic power potent enough to give the arrivals pause. Upon translation from the warp, each astropath's mind flashed with the image of a derelict platform orbiting the planet, framed within a wordless melange of senses evoking union and exchange. Thus interpreted and codified, the meeting ground was decided.

The delegation of World Eaters arrived on the platform via Stormbird insertion. Despite being capable of rapidly delivering a strike force of fifty

legionaries into the heart of even the fiercest of combat zones, in this instance only six warriors departed from the gunship, marching down its forward assault ramp before the craft returned to the void with a draconic burst of flame from its engine arrays.

A flat plane of silver extended before the Space Marines for a kilometre in every direction. The distant light of the system's star, not unlike that of Terra's Sol, reflected from their armour of clean marble and oceanic blue. With no destination given and no path to lead them, they made for the only landmark visible to them, a shallow crystal dome at the platform's centre. Their boots clanked with heavy magnetised tread, disturbing the dust of ages crystallised by ice.

The foremost of their number strode forth with the assured stride of one unafraid to meet whatever might lie before him, a master of war who had been born to deliver conquest. His features were obscured by his armoured helm, a Mark II, plated in bronze in the manner of a Legion veteran and topped by the distinctive transverse crest that marked him as a centurion and a company commander. He carried a spear, longer than he was tall, with its haft resting casually against one shoulder, while a chainaxe and volkite serpenta pistol were slung at his hips.

Only one feature distinguished him from his kindred, as one other of their party bore a centurion's crest upon his helm. Their armour was all the same marble and blue, unadorned by the filigree and pomp that embellished the armour of other Legions. A single item of the lead warrior's panoply set him apart, one that told any World Eater at a glance that this was Mago, captain of the 18th.

It was the cloak he wore: a simple raiment of flexible iron thread, its bronze, cream and midnight-blue hues now clashing against the new colours that marked the warriors who had been reborn as the Eaters of Worlds. Mago did not concern himself with matters of aesthetics, and none of his kindred were fool enough to broach the subject with the centurion. He would wear the cloak with pride until the day he gave his last breath.

The mantle had been presented to him directly following the conquest of the Vuhlskaeon Cybermancy, where Mago had led the 18th Company into the teeth of the fiercest fighting in support of a beleaguered force of his brother War Hounds. It had been Mago's skill as a commander that had turned the tide against the enemy, orchestrating his warriors to punch through the flank of a massed cybernetic horde and shatter its cohesion. It

was his spear that had brought low the archmage leading the resistance against the XII, and it had been his axe that had taken the witchlord's head. Gheer himself had laid the cloak over Mago's shoulders at the end of the compliance before the Legion's assembled might in the Triumphal Hall of the *Adamant Resolve*.

It was the last honour the Legion Master would bestow upon one of his warrior brothers, before the summons of none other than the Master of Mankind Himself brought the War Hounds to a backwater world in the galactic east. A world that they would later come to know as Nuceria. Gheer was a Legion Master who led from the vanguard, the first blade to draw blood whenever the Hounds made war. He had been the first of the XII Legion to meet their father.

And then their father had murdered him.

Four of the other legionaries followed closely behind their captain, the rims of their shoulder guards edged in a thin red stripe designating them as members of Mago's command squad. Orontes, Mago's First Axe, never strayed far from his centurion's side, the immense two-handed chainaxe that marked him as champion of the 18th held loosely in his grip. Following directly behind Mago was Astakos, a veteran of the Legion's founding on Terra and bearer of the company standard. In the rear prowled the newest of Mago's cadre, Hanno the *dimachurias*, spinning his twin falax blades to keep his wrists loose, and Tethys, the blue lacquer of the Legion's Librarius barely dry upon his armour.

Arriving at the crystal dome, the Space Marines entered through its lone opening and came to a halt at its centre. Mago set the butt spike of his spear down, its impact felt only as a slight tremor through his boots. The legionaries' helms swivelled, panning their sight across their unadorned surroundings. They took in the void stretching overhead and the milky, storm-tossed sphere of the planet below. None of the warriors spoke, and no tension tightened their postures as they awaited the opposite delegation.

The last of the World Eaters stood a pace separate from the others, the only legionary present neither of Mago's command squad nor of the 18th. Like Mago, he had been born on Terra, inducted into the XII close to the same time, and through valour and blood he had elevated himself to the rank of centurion. In the days since the discovery of the primarch, however, he had set himself apart from any other in his Legion by becoming the first War Hound to meet the gaze of their gene-sire and live to speak of it. It was

through his efforts that Angron had been convinced to assume command over his sons, on the day that the War Hounds died and the Eaters of Worlds rose in their place.

He was the Eighth Assault Company captain, the equerry, the eyes and ears of the primarch.

‘Khârn,’ said Mago as his internal auspex chimed. The other centurion’s grip tightened reflexively around the haft of the axe he carried, eliciting the slightest of creaks as the material flexed.

The entrance to the dome sealed itself behind the World Eaters, knitting closed into the surrounding crystal as though it had never existed. Soft gasps echoed around the dome’s interior, and the visors of the legionaries chirped and pulsed as their auto-senses detected and conveyed the changes to their environment.

‘Atmosphere,’ said Orontes.

And then the envoys were before them.

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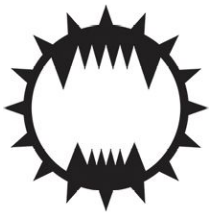

# TWO

Where an instant before there had been but empty space, now a trio of near-identical figures stood. Three human males, unarmoured and weaponless, craned their necks to look up into the ceramite faceplates of the World Eaters with calm, kind eyes.

‘Welcome,’ said the first of them, his voice soft and pleasant.

‘We are pleased–’ spoke the second, with a nearly identical tone.

‘–that our message was clear–’ added the third.

‘–to bring you here with us,’ said the first again.

Mago reached for his collar, disengaging the seals binding his helm and gorget. Gripping it by the faceplate, he pulled the helmet free and set it in the crook of his arm. He would look upon these people of Ninety-Three Fifteen with his own eyes.

They were hairless and androgynous in feature, wearing shimmering prismatic robes over their slim bodies. The cloth bore no insignia, either of the Imperium of Man or any contrary mark of allegiance. Every motion was

echoed between the three in perfect unity, from the subtle rising of their chests as they breathed to the delicate blink of their pale hazel eyes. They radiated a quiet tranquillity, uncanny for mortal men standing before legionaries. Mago could smell no fear on them, nor any other scent for that matter.

‘I am Mago, centurion of His Twelfth Legion, the Eaters of Worlds.’ The other World Eaters clashed fists against their chests as one, the sudden clang having no discernible impact upon the newcomers. ‘Identify yourselves.’

The emissaries smiled in the same moment, flashing their teeth as one. ‘I am Ohna,’ said the first of them.

The centurion looked to the others. ‘And you?’

A soft chuckle rippled over the three as they answered together. ‘We are all Ohna.’

Mago’s cold grey eyes narrowed. ‘Where is the Imperial Embassy? Why does Regent Ikthileon not present himself, and stand here now to make account for the silence of Ninety-Three Fifteen?’

‘Ninety-Three Fifteen,’ replied the lead Ohna softly, beginning again the strange chorus between himself and his two companions. ‘This was the regent’s name–’

‘–but not the true name of our home.’

‘Behold.’ Together they gestured with robed hands towards the planet below. ‘Ghenna.’

‘Our home.’

‘The seed from where we must change and grow–’

‘–to bloom across the stars.’

+We cannot trust them.+

Mago’s jaw tightened. Tethys’ sending pulsed for an instant through each of the World Eaters’ minds like a migraine. His psychic power was raw, formidable, but it lacked the finesse of one who had honed his gift over decades of training beneath Vorias and the other senior Librarians. It made the centurion’s eyes itch.

+Something is awry here, my brothers. There is a… coldness to their minds, a distance I cannot define.+

Mago listened to the warning but gave no outward sign, the neutral expression not leaving his face. He heard the soft clanks of ceramite as his brothers shifted in place behind him. Fingers tightened around weapons at

their brother’s silent words, and the strangeness of the men before them.

‘Talk sense.’ Mago stared down at Ohna. ‘I do not understand. Tell me, where is the regent?’

‘Try as we might–’ Their voices became sorrowful now, their pale eyes downcast. ‘He too did not understand–’

‘–where we are–’

‘–where we must go–’

‘–and the path we must follow to reach there.’

‘These were differences we found the reconciliation of to be impossible.’

A cold, familiar sensation danced down Mago’s spine. His armour reacted, sending stimulants stinging into his bloodstream. His senses grew sharper.

‘Every effort was made–’ said Ohna.

‘–to broaden his sight to see beyond himself–’

‘–and then afterwards, when it failed, to ensure his comfort.’

‘You may rest in confidence–’

‘–that he experienced no pain–’

‘–when his birthform collapsed.’

Faster than eyes could track, Mago had the blade of his spear at Ohna’s throat. Orontes adopted the third shieldless posture, with his left shoulder dipped and axe brandished vertically on his right side. The champion tensed his fists, and the engine within the weapon’s blade snarled with twin tracks of counter-spinning teeth.

‘There is no need for discord,’ said Ohna, his voice remaining placid as he lifted his chin. The other two mirrored him, baring their throats as well. ‘Through no fault of any, our path is simply not the same as that of your Emperor.’

‘We do not seek to disrupt–’

‘–only to diverge.’

‘There is no sorrow in this.’

‘You shall follow your path, and we shall follow ours.’

‘After all,’ Ohna said as he lowered his head a fraction to meet Mago’s gaze, his eyes wide and hopeful.

‘What is a single grain of sand–’

‘–to an hourglass?’

Then Mago saw it. When Ohna had moved, the tip of Mago’s spear had nicked the Ghennan’s throat. A tiny bead of liquid slid down Ohna’s neck, but it was not the deep, vital red of human blood.

It was something else. A pale amber fluid, thinner than human blood, was trickling from the wound.

‘You are not human,’ snarled Mago coldly. The haft of his spear creaked in his grip.

Ohna tilted his head, his face still the very image of childlike calm. ‘Of course I am, Mago of the Twelfth.’

‘Of course I am human–’

‘–even if this form is not.’

‘If I were to become separate from my arm–’

‘–am I no longer human?’

‘Or does humanity exist beyond the simple flesh of our birth?’

‘Do you–’

The blade of Mago’s spear punched out the back of Ohna’s neck in a welter of inhuman amber gore. The screaming teeth of Orontes’ chainaxe descended, bifurcated the second Ghennan from collar to groin, while Hanno leapt forward and dispatched the third in a blur of his twin blades. In a moment it was over.

Mago withdrew his spear, and Ohna toppled back, his face still serene as his ochre vitae emptied out onto the ground.

‘Hmph,’ grunted Hanno as he nudged the torso of the Ghennan he had killed with his boot. ‘An uncanny simulacrum, eh? They look just like us.’

‘So does a mirror,’ Orontes replied. ‘That doesn’t make it human.’

‘In fairness,’ said Hanno, his grin clear beneath his helm’s faceplate, ‘*we* aren’t human either, First Axe. Not really. Not any more.’

‘Enough.’

Mago’s voice silenced those of his brothers. As he replaced his helmet, a soft tone clicked in his ear, and a familiar rune pulsed on his visor as a private vox-channel opened.

‘Fortunate that we brought your new Lexicanum,’ said Khârn. The primarch’s equerry bent down, gathering the upper half of the Ghennan that Orontes had slain by the collar of its tattered robe. ‘He did well in sniffing out these abominations, saving us the ordeal of listening to more of their riddling talk.’

The Eighth captain’s voice was even, low and soft. He rarely displayed any strong emotion, and so he betrayed no surprise at the discovery of the Ghennan’s inhuman nature. There wasn’t even anger. Rather, Khârn sounded as he always did, detached, almost weary in a way that was more

than merely physical. Mago glanced at his brother, imagining the narrow, unscarred face behind the helm, and the tired smile that never reached his eyes.

'I'm going back to the *Conqueror*.' Khârn turned, starting back the way they had arrived, dragging the dead creature with his fist. 'Our father must hear of this.'

The dome reopened, air gasping as it vented into space. Before stepping out, Khârn looked back over his shoulder. 'You should return to the *Hound's Tooth*, Mago. You know what he is going to say. You know by now what comes next.'

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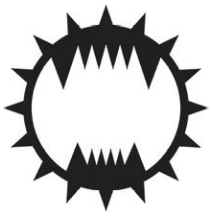

# THREE

The primarch’s hall was shrouded in darkness. Since his discovery, an event that even at the most sanguine of times he would refer to as his capture, Angron had destroyed every source of light in the grand chamber, and none had dared to descend and see any of them repaired or replaced. Khârn walked into that darkness, down the same cracked marble stairs he had the day he first met his gene-sire.

The *Conqueror*’s roaring heart was a distant rumble here, the air cool and wet as a primordial cave to match the absence of light. Khârn’s transhuman eyesight and the auto-senses of his armour adjusted to it in an instant, revealing the shattered architecture of the chamber, the ragged geometry of torn apart pillars and the craters punched into the walls. Even through his helm Khârn could taste the heavy scents upon the air, and as he removed it they assailed him with their full strength. It smelt of scorched metal and stone, and the heady, overwhelming richness of a demigod’s blood.

There was one other World Eater present in the hall, standing a handful of

paces from the stairs. The sharp tang of counter-septic clung to his armour, and the ear-itching hum of the powered ceramite was amplified by the chattering click of a chirurgeon's tools that clung to his back like the limbs of some macabre mechanical spider. Khârn saw a broad, scarred face bathed in the monochromatic green glow of the data-slate built into the warrior's bulky vambrace, lending him an eerie, ghoulish aspect in the gloom.

'Gahlan,' said Khârn as he offered the Apothecary a short nod.

'Equerry,' Gahlan Surlak replied, looking up from his gauntlet and dipping his head to mirror the gesture of respect. Khârn looked past him, into the deepest shadow.

'Sire.'

At the far end of the chamber, where the darkness was thickest, squatted the Eater of Worlds. His back was turned to his sons, massive shoulders twitching as they rose and fell with the wet purr of breath passing through clenched iron teeth. Despite Khârn's enhanced eyesight, there was something draped across his father's silhouette that he could not make out, something that felt like more than natural darkness.

With a soft tumble of cloth and slack limbs, Khârn dropped the Ghennan corpse onto the cracked stone floor. 'It is treachery, sire. This world's regent lies murdered, and its cities are filled with these mechanical abominations that masquerade as men.'

A long silence descended within the hall, threaded only by the sticky, pained breathing of their lord.

'Then why do you waste your breath here?' Angron finally answered, his voice a tectonic ursine growl. The XII primarch turned his head slightly, displaying the snarling profile of an apex predator. Khârn could just make out the dull glint of the cybernetic implants dreadlocking his skull, and a string of saliva as it slowly descended from his father's chin. 'You already know what my answer is going to be. Go out and do it then.'

Khârn straightened. 'You are not coming with us, father?' He shot a glance at Gahlan, but gleaned nothing from the Apothecary's neutral expression. 'Will you not lead the Legion into battle?'

'*Hnnng*.' Angron clawed feverishly at his scalp. 'What good are you and your paperskin "Legion" if you need me to win all of your battles for you?' He flicked his hand away, and Khârn heard the soft patter of blood scattering across the floor.

'The primarch's enhancements are in distress,' Gahlan interjected calmly.

‘I am seeing to his care. But I have studied the orbital scans of the planet that have been collated by the fleet, Eighth Captain. Bringing these oath breakers to heel should not be a troublesome task for you.’

Meeting Gahlan’s gaze, Khârn stepped close to his brother. ‘He won’t fight?’ he asked, whispering sub-vocally so that only a legionary could hear his words. ‘What is happening, Gahlan? He’s only done this once before. You remember the last time.’

‘You think I can’t hear you?’ Angron bellowed, his voice ringing off the broken walls. ‘Plotting together in the corner there like cowards? I said go, Khârn. Now *go*.’

Khârn looked from Gahlan Surlak back to the immense silhouette of his father, crouched in shadow. ‘That is your command, sire?’

Angron snarled, a hurt, bestial noise that sent adrenaline spiking through Khârn’s veins. ‘Kill them,’ hissed the demigod, spitting frothed blood onto the ground. ‘Kill them all.’

Khârn thudded a fist against his chest, and stooped down to collect the corpse he had brought in with him. He stopped, looking up as he felt a hand rest upon his pauldron.

‘Leave it with me, Khârn,’ said Surlak. The Apothecary sank to his haunches, reaching down to brush his fingertips along the dead Ghennan’s skull. ‘This one may just be at the beginning of his usefulness to me.’

Khârn shrugged as he rose, sparing a last glance at Angron before turning away and ascending the stairs.

Across the entirety of the XII Legion fleet, a single order was given. On the command deck of every vessel, within the cramped confines of every fighter, gunship and battle tank, and in the visor of every World Eater’s retinal display, a singular countdown began.

Thirty-one hours.

It had become a painfully familiar span of time, the same as the last compliance campaign, and the one before that, and for every other world the XII Legion had been ordered to render into submission since the discovery of the primarch. Menials, servitors and serfs hurried through the inner workings of the fleet, rushing to complete the preparations they had become practised in undertaking in anticipation of the looming countdown. Gunships were fuelled, ammunition was loaded, and drop pods were winched into place, ready to be filled with their deadly cargo of World

Eaters. Ten thousand such warriors stood ready, their armour polished to a mirror sheen, their weapons and shields at hand.

The timeline had begun the moment Khârn had announced the primarch's command. Fortune favoured the Legion this time, as no enemy fleet confronted them above Ninety-Three Fifteen and no orbital defence network existed to oppose their advance. They would lose no precious hours to the drawn-out mathematical intricacy of void duels or the claustrophobic butchery of boarding actions. With nothing standing between them and their target, World Eaters vessels pounced into low orbit, caution giving way to the aggression that Angron's influence was increasingly drawing out in the hearts of his sons. Their boots would strike Ghennan soil within the very first hours.

Mago strode across the embarkation deck of the *Hound's Tooth*, quickly inspecting the warriors of the 18th as they stood in neat, ordered rows before him. To the wider Legion, the 18th Company was known as the Unbroken. Since its formation, in even the fiercest of battles, its warriors bore the distinction of having never been routed. In fire and blood its unity and brotherhood had been tested time and again, yet never found wanting.

The front three ranks, comprising the company's elite veterans, stood proud with their heavy body-length shields gleaming. Held edge to edge, with spears ready through the armoured aperture that other Legions used for bolters, they would form the phalanx that had driven every foe that had stood before them into oblivion.

'This world is Ninety-Three Fifteen,' bellowed Mago, the centurion's voice carrying over the din of preparation to reach even the rearmost ranks of his Unbroken. 'Though those who dwell upon its surface know it as Ghenna. The only name for it that is of concern to you, my brothers, is *rebel*.'

The rims of combat shields thundered once against the deck plating.

'This world once accepted its place in the Imperium of Man,' Mago continued, 'but now it has turned its back on it. It has given rise to insurrection, and that makes it no different from any planet that rejects compliance outright. These oath breakers have chosen to stand against the Emperor. They have chosen to stand against *you*. And they will feel our blades for it.'

The Unbroken responded, clashing fists against armoured chests while shields and spear butts drummed against the deck.

‘You all know me.’ Mago stopped, basking in the radiance of a company of Space Marines poised to enter battle. ‘And you know there is no more time to waste with words. Be swift. Trust in the shields of your brothers, just as they will trust in yours. Fight as one, and no foe will survive against us. We go forth to war, Unbroken, for Angron and the Emperor!’

The cry was echoed by his Unbroken. It still rang from the rafters as clipped orders rang out from sergeants and sub-commanders. The company split apart by squads, moving at a trot and heading to their designated drop pods and landing craft. The air rippled with the heat from engines spooling up into fiery life. World Eaters locked themselves within drop pods that sealed shut like closing fists, dense-linked chains lifting them to be lowered into firing tubes.

Mago clashed vambraces with Orontes at the foot of their Stormbird, as squads of their brothers filed up and secured themselves within the gunship’s hold.

‘We will do it,’ said the First Axe with conviction. ‘This time, this world, we will do it.’

Mago locked his bronze helm into place with a low hiss, its emerald eye-lenses flaring with power.

‘Let it be so, brother. For the sake of the Legion, let it be so.’

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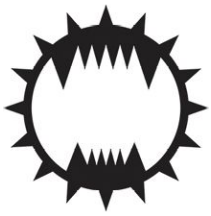

# FOUR

The Second Compliance of Ghenna, or what Imperial histories would later call the Ghenna Scouring, was a very different war for the Eaters of Worlds, in many ways.

For the first time since his discovery on Nuceria, the Legion's primarch would watch from orbit as they made planetfall without him. But even in absentia, his presence was felt. Their father's shadow loomed over them all, as each of their hearts beat in rhythm to his countdown.

The commanders had grown accustomed by then to formulating the stratagems of attack and leading the briefings alone. Angron rarely attended any of them long enough to contribute anything beyond a distracted, snarling indifference before stalking from sight. But now the World Eaters would take to the battlefield without their gene-sire's inhuman prowess to inspire them, to drive them to new heights by so thoroughly dominating his environment it was as though he needed no Legion at all.

This would also mark the first hostile planetfall in the Legion's history

where the XII would commence ground operations without incurring any casualties. High-magnification orbital pict-feeds from the fleet above, beamed in real time into the visors of commanders, revealed no weapons batteries poised to fill the air with exploding flak, nor did they display any of the chaos and confusion that possessed major population centres in the midst of mobilising defenders and massed evacuations. Life on Ghenna appeared to continue as it always had, seemingly unaware of the fact that the sky had caught fire with an invasion by the most terrifying weapon ever created by the human race.

The starkest departure of them all, however, would be the reality on the ground.

Bursting from drop pods and charging down the assault ramps of gunships, the XII Legion rapidly established security perimeters at their respective landing zones. Recon squads ranged out and lines of communication were solidified between adjacent units as companies organised and cohered. Even without the fleet actions and defence networks the XII were accustomed to overcoming, time was a constant factor. The sheer coordination and effort required to deliver thousands of Space Marines into a theatre of battle was gargantuan, and never a swift enterprise. Now on the surface and with every eye glancing at the hours ticking away in their chronos, the order was given to advance.

Twenty-six hours remained.

It has been widely recorded, both in the recounting of remembrancers during the Great Crusade and within each Legion’s own archival histories, how Space Marines made battle. It was said that most often the Iron Hands entered combat in silence, their minds devoid of any distraction and focused entirely on the cold, clinical violence they were poised to deliver. Others, like the sons of Russ or the Khan’s White Scars, joined the fray in a blistering charge, laughing as they levelled bolter and blade. For the XII, however, this had not been their way.

Since the day of the War Hounds’ founding, whether the foe before them was xenos, machine, or even the Emperor’s own Thunder Warriors, the XII commenced hostilities according to their own fashion. Theirs was the only method more terrifying to an enemy than the sight of a legionary sprinting towards them, light gleaming from their raised weapon, with a bellow tearing from their throat.

The War Hounds, and the World Eaters they became, reached the range of their blades walking. No robotic silence or hysterical shouts rang out from their ranks, but rather the calm, even tones of bonded brothers, spoken as though they were strolling to the training pits and not into the teeth of their foes. Rare were the times when an assaulting centurion sped his phalanx to meet the enemy at a trot, and almost never at a run.

They simply marched, imbued with an easy, natural aggression, and did not alter their stride as they struck, rolled through, cut and crushed any foe that dared stand against them, relentless and indomitable as the fall of shadow over the land at nightfall. By this tactic had the Legion defeated countless enemies before they had even engaged them, such was the fear sown by this inhuman calm. It was only when the enemy broke, all morale and cohesion shattered as they turned to flee, that the XII quickened their pace. In the final pursuit, running down and executing a routed enemy, the Legion was in every way the hound of war to match their former title, and later, just as fittingly, those who devour whole planets.

Yet here, there was no enemy to meet them upon their landing grounds. The World Eaters moved unopposed across the rocky, storm-blasted terrain of Ghenna, seeing no sign of life until they reached the gates of its shining cities, which yawned open and unprotected in the face of thousands of invading Space Marines. Gathered just outside the gates, standing in silent tranquillity, were the ones who would meet the Legion.

The Ghennans had no weapons. They had no army. They had their population.

Millions of people, every one of them the same hairless, androgynous makeup as the emissaries Ohna had been, ushered forth from behind the walls of their metropolises. No fear soured their expressions, and no adrenaline shook their limbs. They simply walked forward to meet the World Eaters as though greeting friends, smiling without a trace of malice.

Twenty-three hours remained.

At first, confusion reigned. The front ranks of World Eaters merely shoved the docile Ghennans back, unsure of how to proceed. The legionaries sought to clear a path to march into the cities and lay claim to their central spires, but found themselves awash in a press of false humanity. As more and more of the population came forward, by sheer numbers they began to slow the Legion, and then, slowly but surely, they began to push back. Scouts voxed unit commanders, giving reports of seeing men and women

wrap themselves around the limbs of the World Eaters, their placid expressions unchanged as they sought to drag the transhumans down beneath their weight.

Mago had never faced the like before. Yet he had waged war all his life, and when presented with the unknown, he placed his confidence in his weapons. And the greatest weapon he wielded was the phalanx.

The XII Legion phalanx was a devastating force on any battlefield, often imitated but never bested. Nothing better exemplified the Legion, and the brotherhood that defined it, than rank upon rank of warriors, brothers bonded by being chained together in the training pits, moving and killing as a single unit. It was an impenetrable formation, where a legionary's shield was not meant to protect himself but the brother fighting at his elbow. It was a methodical killing machine, and a thorough one.

They left none alive. Ever. The taking of captives and prisoners never entered a centurion of the XII's considerations as he planned a campaign or readied his brothers to charge. Such matters were not the purpose of the Legions. They were a blade, directed at a throat they had been created to cut, not capture.

Such was the force at Mago's disposal. With the Ghennan capital of Malkoya before him, he led a wall of shields into a sea of millions of tranquil faces.

'For Angron, and the Emperor!' bellowed the centurion. Spears snapped down into the forward position, locking into the vertical slots cut into their heavy shields. The Unbroken continued their march, as the Ghennan multitudes walked into range of their spears and the killing began.

From the centre of the shield wall, Mago drove his spear forward and back, forward and back, in union with his veteran front-rankers. Their hafts sang against their shields as the phalanx reaped life from the mob. The Ghennans fell, both dead and wounded, without sound, those behind them-continuing to walk forward, oblivious to trampling the bodies of the people whose synthetic blood splashed their faces.

'Steady now, keep the advance!' bellowed Mago, his spear never ceasing. The gap ahead of the shield wall vanished. More and more Ghennans came forward, spilling out of the gates. The pressure crushing against his shield was mounting, as if they were holding back the weight of an ocean's rising tide.

'It isn't hard to kill them,' snarled Orontes, amber fluid jetting across his

faceplate as he drove his spear into the sea of blank faces. ‘It’s killing enough of them for it to make a difference. They aren’t even fighting us. What honour can be found in this?’

‘Oh, the songs they’ll sing,’ said Hanno, sending bodies sprawling with a quick blow from his shield to be crushed underfoot.

Forward progress began to stall. Mago grunted as a swarm of Ghennans laid themselves over his spear, their combined weight snapping it in two. He dropped the half he held, replacing it with his volkite serpenta. A concentrated blast from the weapon carved a channel of burning ash through the crowd, yawning for a moment before it was filled in.

‘Imagine then the *dishonour* of being killed by them, brothers,’ said Mago, holstering the pistol and drawing his axe, ‘and re-double your efforts.’

Within the first hours, countless gallons of inhuman lifeblood had been emptied onto the ground, reducing it to a churning yellowed quagmire. Legionaries sank shin deep into the sludge as they killed, building great mounds of dead before them. When the heaps of the slain grew higher than the shield wall, the Ghennans simply climbed atop it, and fell onto the World Eaters from above.

The advance of the phalanx, slowed to a halt, was now reversing. Gaps were being forced between legionaries by the mounting tangle of corpses. Shields were weighed down with the dead, and pulled aside by dozens of grasping hands. One by one, warriors began to disappear.

Flat-lines pulsed insistently at the corner of Mago’s retinal display as his veteran front rankers were overwhelmed and isolated, buried beneath hundreds of bodies until they were crushed to death. A cry of pain and anger echoed over the vox as one veteran’s helm was torn free and his eyes gouged out. And all the while, above the growing tally, the clock continued to shrink.

Nineteen hours remained.

Order was disintegrating. A single mortal was no match for a legionary, but what about one hundred? Or a thousand? Or more? At what point did the pendulum swing against the Space Marine’s favour?

The scale of the violence was galling, even to Mago. His Legion had entered this conflict unprepared for millions of enemies who advanced without any thought of survival and were utterly unaffected by morale. For every Ghennan they killed, a hundred more came on to take their place, still an unbroken stream coming from within their cities. The battle, if the

slaughter surrounding them could be called such, had rapidly approached the point where the tide was beginning to turn.

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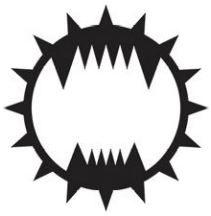

# FIVE

‘Centurion,’ voxed Astakos from his place at the centre of the formation. ‘Our position here is unsustainable. We must realign and adapt, before half of the company or more is lost.’

A snarl of frustration hissed from between Mago’s clenched teeth. He rammed his shield forward, pulping three bodies that remained upright in the crush even in death. He knew there was wisdom in his brother’s words, and the wider perspective the standard bearer’s place in the ranks afforded him compared to Mago’s own fighting on the front line. Separated from the immediate bloodshed, Astakos was watching the Unbroken as they were slowly being swallowed, man by man.

‘Close ranks and withdraw.’ Mago gave the order, swatting away a falling woman with the flat of his chainaxe. ‘Draw bolters and walk it back.’

Those World Eaters who still had use of their spears held them back, allowing the brothers behind them to take the weapons and hand them their boltguns in exchange. Locking them into their shields, they sent rounds

thudding forward into chambers.

There was no need to aim. Firing in accordance with the Legion's tactics for a sustained barrage, the phalanx loosed a pair of mass reactive shots with each backwards step, unleashing a cacophony of shells in steady, terrible rhythm.

The effect of point blank bolter fire on a concentrated mass of unarmoured targets was devastating. Bodies were blown apart. Limbs twisted and spun through the air. Shots that killed one target passed through to detonate and kill three others behind them. It was beyond carnage, beyond massacre, and made all the more disturbing by the utter lack of impact it exhibited upon the surviving robed throng still massing against them.

Mago took advantage of the little separation they had made for themselves to take in the wider battle around the 18th. Runes marking the individual companies blinked haphazardly across his visor display, a far cry from the united line of an organised advance. The rest of the Legion seemed to be faring little better than the Unbroken were.

Communication between commanders was fleeting and muted by the crash of shields and screaming chain weapons. A Stormbird ripped overhead in a screeching dive, trailing flame from her engines after dozens of Ghennans had thrown themselves from the city spires into the turbines. It shattered against the ground in a ball of flame and shrapnel. A light tank, its treads glued by the gore of countless bodies, crawled with the enemy, buried until it could neither fire nor move.

Contact with the fleet in orbit spoke of the same situation playing out in every zone of conflict. The Legion had divided itself in order to land on each of Ghenna's continents simultaneously, moving swiftly to launch a lightning assault against the primary population centres and seize control of the major industrial and transportation infrastructure. All of the XII strike forces had been greeted by the native inhabitants in their millions; all ground to a halt as the World Eaters were buried in a veritable avalanche of artificial blood and flesh. A few units, mainly assault squads who had landed via drop pod insertion, had managed to break through into the urban centres, but the verticality of the spires and narrow confines of the cities' streets made the Ghennan resistance even more suffocating than it was on open ground.

Mago craned his head up to the skies. The combat, such as it was, was of such close order that none of the warships in the fleet had intervened with

surgical strikes from orbit. With a blink the centurion opened a tightbeam vox-link to the void. The fuzzy image of the *Hound's Tooth*'s shipmaster appeared in a tiny window in the corner of Mago's display, revealing a grizzled man in a crisp, white uniform.

'Captain Yuta,' said Mago.

'*Centurion,*' Yuta replied, his gruff voice marred by spikes of interference. '*By the Throneworld, what is happening down there? The orbital picts we are getting, I've never seen the like.*'

'We need your lances, captain. Bring the *Tooth* down as low as you can. I will transmit targeting solutions to you from here on the surface.'

The image in Mago's visor wavered. Captain Yuta's portrait turned, engaging in a curt dialogue with someone off screen. '*My lord,*' Yuta answered after a few moments, the strain in his voice clear in spite of the fragile comms, '*with the conditions planetside, I can't guarantee the fire from our guns won't compromise Legion assets. None of us can. After Brujo, we–*'

The link suffered, cutting off the end of Yuta's sentence, but Mago already knew what he was going to say. Brujo had been three compliances ago, when an orbital strike from the fleet had been fired against the primarch's orders. Not expecting the bombardment, the better part of a Chapter fighting alongside Angron had been incinerated in moments. Once the battle had ended, the primarch had returned to orbit, and not a single one of the shipmasters who had loosed their ship's guns was now alive to see Ghenna.

The admirals were refusing to lend their lances to the surface fight and run the risk of killing their Legion Masters in the crossfire again. Mago and the other warriors on the surface were on their own. With a frustrated blink, he severed the connection to the fleet.

Panning his helm left and right, Mago sought out the standards of their brother units. Other companies had attacked with their own tactics, abandoning the phalanx from the start in favour of charging at a sprint into the enemy and laying into them with axe and sword. These units had succeeded initially in cutting deep into the Ghennan horde, but now quickly found themselves cut off from their reserve support and scattered amongst the enemy without any semblance of cohesion. For every company that had attacked with the customary phalanx, two had chosen such frenzy, including those meant to stand in reserve of the 18th. Anarchy reigned.

Mago held back the urge to spit. Gheer would have never tolerated this. Had the last Legion Master ever witnessed such a display, he would have had the commanders of those companies flogged and demoted to line troopers in view of the entire Legion, before having them exiled to the auxiliary reserve companies in disgrace. Where was the accountability? Where was the brotherhood? It galled Mago to his core to see the central tenets of the Legion's identity, an art of warfare that had sustained them since Terra, so easily cast aside and replaced with blind aggression. But it was simple to understand why.

That was how the primarch fought. Without reason, without thought, without consequence. Angron was less a being of flesh and blood than a storm of violence, all restraint lost to the implants tearing apart his mind. It was an awesome sight to behold, and Mago could not deny the power of it, but adopting Angron's way of war was killing the World Eaters here.

The fusillade of bolter fire had bought the Unbroken a handful of seconds, but that was all. Serene faces once more filled the visors of the World Eaters, smiling kindly as they stepped over the mutilated remains carpeting the ground. They called out softly to their invaders, speaking of the needlessness of their conflict. They threaded their way through the ranks of the company like vines winding through crumbling stone, taking hold of a World Eater's arms and legs until they stumbled, and piling atop their chests until ceramite split and organs pulped. Hands calmly tore at helmet seals, inserting slender fingers into eyes and beyond to crack the thin bone behind them and scramble the brain.

'This is folly,' spat Hanno. He had lost his shield in the fighting, and now worked with his falax blades to hack and slice at anything that came near him. 'We should pull back, and order the fleet to burn this world to glass from orbit.'

'No!' said Mago as he vaporised another swathe of Ghennans with his serpenta. He swiftly holstered the pistol in favour of his chainaxe, swinging low and halving three more in a blur of screaming teeth. 'He won't accept that. You know he won't.'

'You believe he will accept *this*?' asked Orontes, the First Axe giving voice to the thought filling every head in the company.

'He will when we are victorious,' answered Mago. 'Their numbers may be vast, but they are not infinite. So long as we draw breath, we will fight, and we will kill. Call forth your wrath, kindred. It is they who will break first,

not us.’

Renewed vigour surged through the 18th as they rallied around their centurion, driving out the lactic sting that prickled at their muscles from hours of prolonged melee combat. Shoulder locked next to shoulder. One brother waded into the Ghennans’ midst with chainaxe and gladius, while another covered his back and flanks with the booming crash of bolter fire.

For the first time since hostilities had commenced, Mago and his brothers were winning ground again. The shadow of Malkoya’s gates fell over them, tantalisingly close and yearning to be stormed. They had to get inside, press their advantage and make the Ghennans reel. Then the capital would be theirs for the taking.

A blurt of noise cried out from somewhere to the 18th’s right. It was a standardised vox tone, denoting a compromised situation and a call for aid. It did not come from the lips of a centurion, Mago realised as his heart sank. That meant there was no centurion alive within that company to voice it.

‘The Forty-Fourth,’ voxed Astakos. He raised his banner and turned it to face their right side. Mago swore under his breath as he pulled back for a moment to scan their flank, his eidetic memory recalling the company tasked with being their support.

The 44th was dying. Like so many of the other units its commander had hurled his warriors blindly into the fight, and now they found themselves dissolving one dead legionary at a time. It could scarcely be recognised as a company any longer, just isolated pockets of marble and blue, brothers fighting back to back until they were drowned.

If they did not intervene, their brothers would be completely overrun.

‘They have pushed too far ahead of the line and are cut off,’ reported the standard bearer. ‘All of the other companies are engaged – no one else can move to support them. If we do not, they are lost.’

‘What was Barca thinking?’ said Mago as he ripped a Ghennan in two with his chainaxe.

‘It seems the centurion wasn’t thinking at all,’ replied Astakos. ‘Barca and the Fourty-Fourth were supposed to be behind us and functioning as our rearguard support.’

‘Mago, the gates are within our grasp,’ said Orontes between scything slashes of his axe. ‘We have the chance to break them here if we press. Look at the time. If we pull back now, there will not be enough remaining to advance.’

Lightning surged past Mago and immolated a dozen Ghennans. ‘Time is against us, captain,’ said Tethys. ‘Either we aid the Forty-Fourth or we advance, but we cannot do both.’

‘We cannot leave them,’ said Mago.

‘Look at the chrono!’ Orontes shook a pair of robed bodies loose from his shoulders. ‘A horde of these bastards lies between us and the Forty-Fourth. They were supposed to be our support, they should not have been attacking at all. Barca knew that, and he ran in like a fool and now he’s got what he deserved. By breaking off and helping them, we will lose the initiative we have bled for. And *he* will bleed us more for our failure.’

‘No!’ Mago roared. ‘We do not achieve victory by leaving our own behind. I will not stand by with our backs turned and abandon our kindred to die while we can aid them.’

‘But the primarch’s orders–’

‘To the abyss with his countdown!’ snapped Mago, his mind decided. ‘They were our brothers long before we were his sons.’

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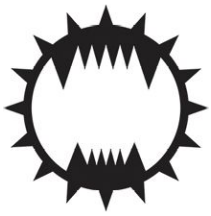

# SIX

Night fell over the battlefield. The shadows cast by Malkoya's spires stretched back across the carnage still being wrought after over twenty-four hours of unceasing combat. The World Eaters' assault had grown increasingly desperate with the passage of time, with whole units throwing themselves forward in an attempt to break through the masses of synthetic-humanity swarming over them. Space Marines scrambled through a carpet of bodies that rose above their knees, ending lives with every passing moment but doing nothing to diminish the millions that yet stood between them and victory.

'Form the speartip!' Mago called out. Those Unbroken who still had their shields pushed forward into a tight wedge formation with the rest of the company within. The World Eaters followed the movements of Astakos' standard, rotating until the tip of the wedge was aimed at the struggling 44th.

Mago hauled his men about by their shoulders and oriented them into

place, looking back and seeing that his champion was still furiously hewing into the horde.

‘First Axe!’

Orontes slammed a Ghennan to the ground, the head of his two-handed axe screaming as it tore the thing apart. With a frustrated bark he leapt back behind the shield wall, pressing next to the centurion.

‘I hope you know what you’re doing,’ Orontes voxed over a private link. ‘We had a chance to turn this, a real chance.’

‘We fight as brothers,’ Mago replied. ‘Brotherhood, Orontes. Without that, we are nothing.’

‘Indeed. Remember that, when our father does what he does to those same brothers.’

Mago blink-cut the vox-link. He had no time for Orontes’ rage, or to ponder their father’s. This invasion was floundering, and if the Legion had any hope of victory, he would have to do all he could to rally and save as many of his kin as possible.

Slowly, the speartip advanced into the throng. For the first time in hours, killing ceased to be the Unbroken’s aim. Generating momentum was. They needed speed, casting the enemy aside from their path rather than stopping to eliminate them.

It took more than an hour simply to reach the outermost warriors of the 44th. Over an hour of strained, grinding advance, struggling to put one foot forward and then the other, crushing the dead beneath them into the sucking quagmire of the ground. World Eaters slipped and lost balance, kept upright by their brothers and spurred on to keep pushing. They fought, arms set into the backs of those ahead of them, driving on until they made contact with the first warriors of their brother company.

Mago peered through a gap in his shield wall, scanning for insignia amongst the World Eaters still standing in the chaos. The flash of a snapping chain caught his eye, drawing them to a battered fighter bearing the marks of a squad leader.

‘Sergeant!’

The World Eater planted his boot into a Ghennan’s chest, stomping down to wrench the spiked globe of his meteor hammer free from the collapsed ruin of the simulacrum’s face. He turned, looking up to regard Mago and the speartip then, the white of his armour stained a filthy ochre.

‘Hail, centurion,’ said the warrior with the furious calm of one born to be

on a battlefield. As he spoke he never ceased moving, the chain of his weapon never still as it snapped out to reap life from the robed masses packed around him.

‘Where is your captain?’ asked Mago, spurring his company on to fight their way closer. ‘Where is Barca?’

‘Dead,’ the sergeant answered. ‘We ran into a great mass of them, too many. They wore our blades down with their numbers. It was like an ocean, and it dragged many of us down. Barca was among the first of them.’

‘You were our support unit,’ Orontes snarled from his place beside Mago. ‘Why did you advance?’

The sergeant spun his meteor hammer in a blistering arc, clearing a metre around himself for a moment before he answered. ‘Because my captain ordered me to.’

The moment was enough for the Unbroken to reach him. The shield wall parted, opening just long enough to draw the other World Eater within the speartip before the shields crashed back together like a slamming gate. Mago looked out across the battlefield again. Everything was in disorder, and the time was bleeding away to nothing. He looked to the sergeant of the 44th. ‘What is your name?’

The warrior shook yellow blood from his arms, failing to rid them fully of the layers of gore that slathered them. ‘Delvarus.’

‘Rally your kin, Delvarus.’ Mago laid a hand on the sergeant’s pauldron. ‘We will help you recover as many as you can and join them with our ranks. Until this battle is ended and the names counted, the Forty-Fourth is yours.’

Delvarus gave a short laugh. ‘My own company. I shall enjoy this while I can, before we go back into orbit and Angron executes us all for this travesty.’

‘Do not speak of our primarch in such a way,’ Orontes warned.

‘Ask yourself this,’ said Delvarus with another laugh, gesturing to the battle around them. ‘How many of the World Eaters throwing themselves into the abyss in these last few hours are doing it so they won’t have to be alive to face his judgement?’

‘You dare besmirch the honour of our gene-sire.’ The blade of Orontes’ axe revved in his fists. ‘And now you do the same for your own Legion?’

Delvarus offered the First Axe a passionless shrug. ‘We are all warriors here, champion. If we are strong, we live. If we are chaff, we die. What else is there to talk about?’

‘Enough.’ Mago put himself between the two. ‘This bickering is pointless and shames the Legion. Get your company into some kind of order, Delvarus, and do it now.’

‘As you say, my fellow centurion.’

‘I want him in the pits,’ Orontes growled to Mago over a private link. ‘If we don’t get ourselves killed first, when we are back with the fleet, I want him in the pits.’

‘Leave that to then,’ said Mago. ‘We have more than enough to occupy us here.’

The sound of approaching engines brought Mago’s eyes skywards. Tiny motes of light flashed, glittering in the night sky. Within moments the distant rumble grew into a roar as the lights grew brighter and larger, and multiplied. The sky became alight in a moving constellation, resolving into the boxy shapes of bulk landers.

‘Behold, our armoured support,’ Astakos spat. ‘At long last.’

The unexpected course of the invasion had thrown the Legion’s secondary deployments into total disarray. With order and unit cohesion disintegrated, the bulk landers bearing artillery, tanks and the stores of ammunition needed to resupply the frontline had descended from orbit to find their designated landing sites had become embattled warzones or were completely overrun.

Now, the Legion was just beginning to claw out enough open ground to get its heavy armour onto the field. Mago looked up at the bulk landers, and the promise of the weapons they carried in their holds. If they were able to land artillery and coordinate a concentrated bombardment, they could wipe the surface clean of the Ghennans, and march on to capture Malkoya.

‘Combine ranks,’ ordered Mago. ‘Merge with the Forty-Fourth and rebuild the shield wall. We need to clear the ground, make space for the tanks.’

Spurred on by the hope of turning the tide, the World Eaters renewed their assault. They drove the shield wall forward, clawing for every inch to clear ground for the armour to land. The enemy continued their uncanny tactics, climbing atop the shields and heaps of dead to force gaps in the line.

His axe revving, Mago ran its teeth across the Ghennans crowding against his shield. One of the proxies stuck his face into the teeth, blinding the centurion in a wash of false blood. The others seized upon his distraction, three of them using their bodyweight to drag his shield down while others scrambled onto Mago’s back and shoulders.

Eye-lenses still slathered in gore, Mago could feel hands grasping at his collar, trying to open the seals and pull his helmet loose. He shook them off, but another leapt forward, grabbing hold of Mago's head. An armoured fist closed over the Ghennan's skull, wrenching it off the centurion and hurling it back over the shield wall in a crackle of snapping vertebrae.

Mago looked back, seeing the brother who had come to his aid. His armour was new, and the weapons in his hands were freshly stamped standard issue. A new initiate, not long raised from mortality.

'Well met, Brother Salicar.' Mago quickly dipped his head. 'You have my thanks.'

'You honour me, centurion,' the young World Eater replied. His bolter crunched against his shoulder as he fired a burst of shells into a cluster of Ghennans scaling atop a mound of their own dead to jump their shields. Their bodies were flung back, exploding in a cloud of yellow gore and scraps of robe.

Inch by inch, the Unbroken won enough ground for the first of their armour to land. Heat prickled their backs from the heavy thrusters slowing the lander's descent. The boxy vessel lowered its weight down onto its landing claws, sinking into the soft earth and carpet of bodies covering the ground.

The huge bay doors of the lander yawned open, folding into a hydraulic ramp that thudded onto the ground. The darkness within the lander was broken by floodlights and the throaty roar of promethium-fuelled engines. The brutal angular shapes of Legion heavy battle tanks appeared, led by an enormous Fellblade that filed down the ramp into the ground that Mago had cleared for them.

The commander of the Fellblade rose from its turret cupola, firing into the mob with his bolt pistol. Handing his shield off to Salicar to take his place in the wall, Mago hurried to the massive war machine, with Astakos at his side.

'Kaeptra,' the veteran laughed under his breath as he saw the tank's commander. He shot Mago a wry glance. 'The Red Centurion, our salvation. Thank the primarch, Kaeptra,' Astakos exclaimed at the new arrival. 'It is good that simply *watching* the battle from the air seems to have bored you.'

'You're lucky we got here at all.' Kaeptra dropped a depleted magazine from his bolt pistol and slapped in the last one hanging from his belt. He

chambered a round and resumed firing from the Fellblade's cupola. 'This isn't the first place we tried to land. And you think this place is bad, you should see the space port. There are so many you can't even see the ground.'

'Just get in the fight,' said Mago. Tension twisted his face into a scowl as he checked the chrono.

Kaeptra pounded a fist against the turret, and his tank's twin-barrelled accelerator cannon took aim. With a crack of thunder the weapon fired, rocking the tank back on its heavy treads. A fireball exploded in the midst of the Ghennans, reducing several square metres to a smouldering crater that pattered with a rain of limbs and viscera.

'Keep firing,' said Mago as he clambered off the Fellblade's hull. 'Kill everything you see.'

'Formidable weapons,' mused Astakos.

'True,' agreed Mago as they moved to the other tanks. 'If only we had had them from the start.'

Lining up behind the Fellblade was a pair of Deimos-pattern Whirlwinds. The missile pods atop the boxy artillery tanks were designed to deliver ordnance from great distance beyond line of sight. But here, they would need to bring their deathstorm down at point blank range.

Mago approached the Techmarine commanding the first Whirlwind. 'Load anti-personnel,' Mago told the tank commander. 'Incendiary Castellans.'

The World Eater nodded, and withdrew back into his tank.

The missile pods twitched as they were loaded with ordnance, then thrummed as they craned upwards. Such was the close range of the fighting that the turrets were nearly vertical when they fired. A wall of smoke appeared in thunder as they loosed their payload, the missiles rising on contrails of wispy exhaust before dropping in a tight arc.

The barrage detonated a metre over the Ghennans' heads. Shells burst with an ear-splitting crash, spraying down and drowning the earth in a hurricane of burning liquid promethium. The false men vanished in the firestorm, boiled away into pieces and then scraps and then a pinkish yellow smoke. By the time the smoke cleared, the ground glittered with dirty flash-fused glass, sheened in gore and tatters of scorched multi-coloured fabric.

After over thirty hours of war, the path ahead had been cleared. Entire metres opened up in front of the line, clear through to Malkoya. Mago sprinted forward, the shield wall disintegrating around him as the World

Eaters pounced to seize upon the open ground. Boots crunched against the layer of filthy black glass covering the earth from the Whirlwinds' bombardment, chips of it flying in their wake.

A savage grin split Mago's features, running with Astakos, Orontes and Hanno at his side. The gates were within reach. Victory was within reach.

He didn't hear the tone sound in his helm. He only heard its sharp ring when the charge around him faltered, and the World Eaters ground to a halt.

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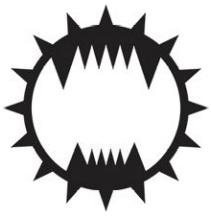

# SEVEN

Like a Titan falling through the clouds to earth, the chrono had struck zero. The timer redlined in the retinal display of every World Eater on Ghenna, striking each of them as deeply as any bolter or blade. Across thousands of transhuman warriors, a single thought pervaded every mind.

They had failed.

Mago bit down until blood dribbled down his chin. Sprawled legless at his feet, a Ghennan stared up at him with the same uncanny innocence as all the rest. It was smiling softly, even with half its face burned away, as though they had not spent the last hours turning the earth to a quagmire with each other's blood.

Sense fled from Mago, overtaken by rage. He forgot his axe and his serpenta and hurled his fists down into that smile. He kept swinging until his visor was drenched in yellow blood, until he had punched a crater into the charred ground with the shards of the Ghennan's head crushed into the bottom.

‘Centurion!’

Mago whirled around at the voice. It was Astakos. Venerable, indomitable Astakos. Mago felt the rage crumble into something cold and ashen in his chest as his brothers pulled him to his feet.

‘It is over,’ said the standard bearer. Stooping to recover his weapons, Mago’s brothers offered them back to their centurion. Taking them, Mago roared, firing another blast from his serpenta that vaporised a swathe of Ghennans still standing before the gates.

Astakos grabbed Mago by the collar, hauling him back around until they were face to face. ‘It is *over*,’ he repeated, his voice like steel. ‘We have to go back, now.’

Mago placed a hand on Astakos’ arm, and the veteran released him. He turned to look at his brothers, their weapons blunted and broken, their armour yellowed with gore. They would have to trudge close to knee-deep through the dead on their way back, and amidst the sea of prismatic robes he saw the white ceramite of their own, standing out like pearls. He’d had no contact with the 18th’s Apothecaries since the battle had escalated. Mago had no idea how high the tally of fallen World Eaters had reached, or if any of their genetic legacies had been recovered.

‘Assemble the company,’ he said finally. ‘We will return together, as one.’

The order rippled out across the XII over the Legion-wide vox-channel. Brothers pulled each other back from the killing, supporting those wounded who were able to walk and carrying those who were not. Centurions marshalled and rallied their companies by squads and, forming a bloodied reflection of the force that had taken to the surface thirty-one hours before, they disengaged.

The moment the World Eaters broke off their attack, the Ghennans halted their own advance to meet them. The multitude of tranquil faces did not pursue the Space Marines, nor did they spare a glance to the countless of their dead that carpeted the ground three or four bodies deep. They simply stood together before their city, silent and serene, watching as the Eaters of Worlds retired from the battlefield.

The Legion made the trek back to their collection point, filing into gunships and landers and helping each other aboard.

At the foot of his Stormbird, Mago knelt down. He dug his fingers into the earth, drawing out a handful of Ghenna’s dark soil. Mago stared at it for a long moment, before pouring it into a pouch and hanging it at his belt.

Without another look back, Mago climbed up the Stormbird’s assault ramp. The gunship lifted into the air, rising to join the others as the World Eaters returned to orbit to account for what they had done, and what they had failed to do.

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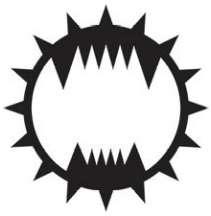

# EIGHT

Since its creation, the Triumphal Hall had been a place of glory for the XII Legion. It was sacred ground, where all legionaries, from the most senior Chapter Master to the lowliest aspirant, could walk and contemplate the historic triumphs won by their brotherhood. The walls undulated with the tattered banners of a thousand foes, taken from the dead hands of the conquered and displayed in honour since the halcyon days of the War Hounds that traced the Legion's history back to the unification of Terra itself.

Mago's mind took him back to those bygone days. He could almost feel the thunder of armoured fists again, ringing from the walls of the *Adamant Resolve*. He could hear the shouts of victory, the fury and zeal of a warrior brotherhood forging itself into a weapon worthy of the father they knew one day would come to lead them.

But the ship he stood upon was no longer called the *Adamant Resolve*, and he was no longer a War Hound. Everything had changed in the wake of

Nuceria. And now, standing in the Triumphal Hall where they had once watched with pride as they raised the colours of the newest conquered civilisation, Mago and his kin gathered in failure.

The World Eaters had assembled without delay after they had retreated from the surface of Ghenna. They formed up by companies, their ranks gaping and uneven from the losses each of the units had suffered. Their armour was in the same condition as it had been upon the battlefield, cracked and filthy, and slathered with the oily amber gore of their foe. Many were so drenched in it that the clean marble-white of the Legion was gone, replaced by an ugly hue that was more akin to Dorn's Fists than the heraldry of the XII. Sparks leapt from damaged armour servo joints. Warriors clutched blackened bolters and the snapped hafts of broken spears, gathering around ragged standards.

Gone was the calm, measured talk between brothers and squads, the easy confidence of the Legion poised for war. Silence hung over them now, as they awaited their primarch's wrath.

In an entrance bereft of pomp or fanfare, Angron arrived. His stride was a hunched, prowling gait, the movements of a beast stalking out in a constant search of prey. The red and bronze armour he wore clanked and clattered as he walked, priceless Mechanicum ingenuity rendered into the form of crude gladiatorial panoply. In his fists he bore his colossal two-handed chainaxe, *Widowmaker*. He easily outpaced the plodding steps of his huscarls, the Devourers, in their bulky Cataphractii plate, the act alone conveying his contempt for the Legion's elite and their oath to protect him.

The very same contempt each of his sons felt upon them, when he looked out at the gathered Legion.

And still, in spite of everything, Angron took Mago's breath away. He recognised the intoxicating effect that the primarchs had upon all of humanity, but he truly believed in the depths of his heart that no one but a legionary could fully comprehend their splendour. To be awed by a being at a genetic level, that the mere sight of him, being in his presence for even a second no matter how far removed, could change everything. That a single word from his lips could fundamentally alter the entire course of a life.

'Failure,' said Angron. The word filled the air, reaching every ear without him even needing to raise his voice. '*Hnnng*, failure *again*.

'I told you, Khârn,' spat Angron, his bloodshot eyes glaring upon the equerry who walked from his place at the head of the Eighth Assault

Company to stand at his father's side. 'I told you to kill them all. You aren't the servants of my brothers, who waste time caring about prisoners and politics and any other meaningless distraction. When I give the order to unleash you, everything must die. Men, women, old, sick and dogs, everything! Total extermination, and nothing less. My Eaters of Worlds, ten thousand of them, cannot conquer a single world? Truly? Pathetic.

'Tell me,' he blinked, each eye out of sequence, before glaring sidelong back at Khârn. 'What weapons did they have?'

'They had no weapons,' the Eighth captain answered, his voice measured and calm. Angron turned and stalked closer to his equerry.

'No weapons?' The primarch snuffed at the beginnings of a nosebleed. His glare shifted from Khârn to the assembled Legion before him. 'You were beaten by a foe that had no weapons? Do not tell me such things.'

Angron raised his head to the rafters. '*Hnnng*, oh, my brothers and sisters, what would you have said to that? You, who fought your way out of bondage with me, out of the caves to wreak our vengeance.' He looked back at Khârn again. 'Could any of you here have even looked them in the eye?'

This time, Khârn did not answer his lord. He had learned by now that when the Nails were running hot, the primarch had no interest in a dialogue.

'A rabble of escaped slaves,' Angron continued, 'half blind from hunger, nearly dead from the cold, yet still we took the high-riders on. And we won! Did we have your precious fleets, your armour, your weapons? No. We fought them at Hozzean with sticks and rocks. And with sticks and rocks, we made that whole city howl, and then we burned it to the ground. We took so many high-rider skulls that we ran out of numbers to count them with. We tore the silver lace out of their heads while they still drew breath, paying them back double for all the iron and fire they had stuffed into ours!

'All of this we did, in the time the sun took to rise and sink again into the ground. A single Nucerian day, thirty-one of your Terran hours, was all we needed to earn our victory. A feat that you paperskins, with all of your arsenals, with all of your vaunted training, have failed to match.'

Mago bit down on the darkness constricting his chest. In all the years since his elevation into the Legion, all the wars, he had known loss and defeat. But he had never known shame, true shame, until Angron had come.

'Warlords,' spat Angron, the half taunt he used for the company captains, 'come and turn the rope. Account for your defeat.'

The surviving captains of each company stepped forward, repeating the ritual they had done time and again before their father's eyes. They removed their armour, pulling away the plates of gore-slick ceramite until each of them was stripped to the waist. The very same rite would be performed by every World Eater that night, but it was the centurions' lot to bear the humiliation of doing it before the assembled Legion.

Mago drew his combat blade, feeling along his torso and tracing the long scar that began at his spine and wound around him like a dark red serpent. His victories from the duelling pits were clean; *red twists* their father called them. But the cuts marking those campaigns where conquest had not been achieved when the Nucerian day had expired, were not.

After he found the end of his triumph rope, Mago sank the blade deep. It had to be deep in order for the scar it would leave to persist against his body's efforts to heal it. Blood trickled down his hip as he punched the knife through his flesh all the way until its tip scraped against his black carapace.

Reaching down to his belt, Mago took the small pouch that hung there. He opened it and emptied its contents, the measure of Ghennan soil he had collected from the battlefield, into the palm of his hand. Levering the knife's edge down to stretch the wound wider, he packed the dirt into the cut.

The pain of the blade was nothing to Mago. It barely registered, nor did the dull burn of the alien earth as it filled the gash in his side and mingled with his already congealing blood. The hurt that he felt then was an inner one, the disgrace that would remain forever when his body made the scar and it became a *black twist*. Turning the rope was one of the only traditions that Angron had allowed the Legion to adopt from his home world. And in their desperation, the World Eaters would take any opportunity to forge bonds with him, even those born of failure and defeat.

The blood had already ceased flowing by the time Mago finished. He looked to Khârn, packing soil into his own twist, but his brother did not meet his gaze. With the captains chastened in the eyes of all, they replaced their armour in silence. But the primarch was not finished with them.

'You call yourselves… conquerors,' snarled Angron. 'You dare to name yourselves the Eaters of Worlds, when again and again you fail to measure close to the fury of my brothers and sisters who earned their name and glory in fire and blood, in the lamentations of their enemies. You are nothing but

pretenders.’

The primarch’s hands twitched as they clenched and unclenched around the haft of *Widowmaker*. He began to pace, his bronze armour rattling with every pounding step. His sons watched in silence, dreading the words they knew were soon to come.

‘Warriors with the Nails breathing hot smoke in their skulls would not have failed me. They would have had the strength to endure, *hnnng*, the will, without restraint or any thought given to honour or survival. Without the fear of the death that is the only destiny any of you will ever know.’

Blood was pouring freely now from Angron’s nose and one of his ears. His yellow eyes narrowed. ‘*Urgh, gh* – I look out at you all, my *Legion*, and all I see is weakness. And weakness will not be tolerated. Weakness must be expunged.’

Angron stopped. With a single word, the primarch issued sentence.

‘Decimation.’

Mago’s heart sank. Once more the lives lost in their failure were to be compounded by Angron’s rage. One in ten of the warriors who had survived, who had fought and bled for each other, for him, would yield their throats as punishment. One in ten would die to appease their lord’s broken mind.

‘Draw lots or make examples, warlords,’ said Angron. ‘But one in ten is the price that must be paid.’

‘No.’

Every eye fell upon Mago before he had even realised it was he who had spoken. Angron rounded on him, closing the distance between himself and the centurion in three bounding strides. The primarch towered over his son, blood-laced spittle bubbling from the lipless gash of his mouth. ‘No?’

‘On Quadra Ni,’ said the 18th captain, ‘it took more than one Nucerian day to achieve conquest, and by your command, we killed ourselves. And we did it again, at Brujo, and Holu, and Trikaton, and Cestus Four. Our blades are soaked in the blood of brothers, our own kin, for no reason other than to slake your wrath.’

‘Spilled,’ Angron lowered his brutish face until it was level with Mago’s, ‘because you failed.’

‘We did not fail!’ Mago roared. He knew all too well the ways of his father. He knew that he could measure the remainder of his life in moments. But he no longer cared about what would happen to him. He would have his

say, in front of all his brothers, before Angron tore him apart.

‘We went back every time, after killing our own kin in shame, and we conquered those worlds. We won those wars. The flag of the Imperium was raised over their cities, and their peoples are now subjects because of our toil, and because of our blood.’

Mago looked his father in the eye. ‘And here we stand now, given the order that those of our brothers who have fallen with honour today must be joined by ones who will fall in disgrace. No.’ He shook his head. ‘No more.’

For a few seconds, Angron said nothing. Mago felt the hot breath of the primarch on his face, reeking of blood. Suddenly Angron reared from his hunch to full height, his face turned upwards, and he laughed.

Angron’s laugh was a booming, wet sound. It rang across the Triumphal Hall like thunder. Mago had never heard it before, perhaps none of the Legion had, with the possible exception of Khârn. It did nothing to diminish the terror that exuded from his presence.

‘I like you, captain,’ said Angron, cuffing away at the blood trickling from his nose and baring the iron pegs that replaced his teeth in a feral grin. ‘You at least have the spine to speak your thoughts. That is why I will still let you pick.’

‘Father–’

‘Choose now,’ said Angron, the smile gone as quickly as it had come. ‘Or I will choose for you.’

‘This Legion is your Legion. Its warriors carry your blood in their veins. I will not see their lives squandered any further. Enough have died today already. I am asking you, my pri-march, my *father*. Do not do this.’

Any trace of the amusement Angron had expressed moments before had vanished. ‘So many times, again and again,’ he snorted, his eyes twitching as they went in and out of focus. ‘*Hnnng*, over and over you tell me “we are your sons”, “you are our lord”, “our lives are yours to command”. Is that not what you told me in the cave, Khârn? To get me to come back here? Are you liars now, as well as cowards? Am I your master or aren’t I? If I am the master of your fates, as you have so often said, then the fate I proclaim now is decimation.’

Mago clenched his teeth until his jaw creaked. ‘Madness.’

‘Careful, captain,’ said Khârn from the primarch’s side, lending his voice a cold edge with the warning.

‘You will choose,’ Angron repeated, his temper rising, ‘or I will choose for you. Who will be first?’

‘I will.’

Salicar walked through the ranks of the 18th, brothers parting before him until he stood at Mago’s side. ‘Do not take from the front-rankers, lord. Their valour has been proven in battle.’ He knelt before the centurion, pulling his head back to expose his throat.

Mago looked down at Salicar, the future of the World Eaters, a wellspring of potential to be snuffed out and cast aside for nothing. ‘Theirs was not the only valour that was proven, brother.’

‘For the Legion,’ Salicar whispered, eyes open and face calm in acceptance.

Mago hesitated. He closed his eyes, drew in a breath, and opened them again. ‘For the Legion,’ he whispered back, as he took up his knife.

‘No.’

Mago turned, his blade still poised at Salicar’s throat.

Angron’s lipless maw twisted in an ugly grin. ‘Put your blade away. Your spirit does you credit, but you talk too much. You, captain, will do it by hand.’

The knife shook in Mago’s hand. This was beyond punishment, beyond humiliation. This was hatred. What kind of father could hate his own children so? What father could do this?

‘I won’t,’ said Mago. The clanging of his knife hitting the deck reverberated across the Triumphal Hall. ‘No more, father.’

‘You refuse me?’ Angron’s eyes lost focus, a furnace-hot anger boiling tremors through his immense frame. ‘*Me?*’

Froth burst from Angron’s lips. A chilling ursine growl rumbled from between his clenched iron teeth. *Widowmaker*’s head crashed against the deck as Angron clawed at the cables threading his scalp. His head started thrashing, throwing spittle in all directions. The World Eaters edged away from him.

The primarch’s head almost blurred, swinging from side to side. They could all hear the cables of the Butcher’s Nails, tugging and squealing as they pulled against his scalp. One of the connections snapped taut, strained against Angron’s skull, and in a burst of sparks, severed loose.

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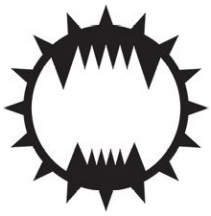

# NINE

It was as though the air had been driven from the room. Without any of them realising it, an entire Legion's hands strayed to their weapons. The mortal emotion of fear had been scoured from them long ago, but adrenaline sparked through their hearts as they watched, fired by the uncertainty of not knowing what was going to happen next.

'*Geh*,' Angron's thrashing abruptly ceased, his face twisting with sharp spasms. His eyes were a pair of bloodshot stars bulging out of his head. Froth bubbled from his lips, and the sound of rending metal was heard as his grip on *Widowmaker* tightened until his fingers deformed the haft.

Angron's jaw worked in bites and tremors, barking out sounds that faded back and forth between furious noise and a shrill, lilting tongue that sent shivers across his sons. They recognised that language, though none of them had ever spoken it. Angron wasn't on the *Conqueror* any more.

He was back on Nuceria, in the pits.

Batto, captain of the Devourers, was the first to come forward to his

father’s side to try to placate him. Within a single second Angron had torn both of his arms from their sockets and sent them flying through the air, before he lifted the Terminator from his feet and broke his head open against the ground. One of Batto’s arms crashed at Mago’s feet, the fingers twitching around the chainglaive they still held.

With a roar that shook the deck, Angron leapt into the assembled World Eaters. Half a dozen legionaries died just breaking his fall, while swathes of others were felled by the blistering sweeps of *Widowmaker*’s churning teeth. Blood flowed across the deck plating, emptying from sons who could not come to grips with what was happening to them, or how to respond. Some of them ran at Angron, attempting to wrestle him to the ground and pin him down with sheer weight of numbers. The primarch hurled them back with a howl, burying *Widowmaker* into any within his reach.

‘Get clear!’ shouted Mago, looking to his sergeants as each of them fought to keep control of their squads in the midst of the pandemonium. ‘Move back and get clear of him!’

Angron seized a warrior by the legs and swung him like a flail. He smashed the Space Marine into the ground and stamped his skull to splinters.

From the rear of the Triumphal Hall, Tethys watched his lord turn upon his own sons in mindless rage. The other members of the XII’s Librarius, a fraction of the number present in the other Legions, were all gathered together, allowed to stand with their kin only so long as they remained where they would be furthest from the primarch. Angron had been emphatic in expressing his hatred for those gifted in the art, and the elevated pain that psychic minds exerted upon his Butcher’s Nails.

Tethys had retained only a handful of memories from his life before the Legion. He held each close within the core of his mind, an image or a smell, a sound or a feeling, each fragment precious. The most complete of them was from his boyhood, encountering a beast dying to a hunter’s spear. Even in his youth Tethys had possessed the gift. He felt the animal’s pain as clear as if it had been his own, a single starburst of confusion as the full agony of the blade punching deep into its flesh flared through it.

Angron was that way all the time. Forever trapped in that instant of alarm and pain.

Tethys gritted his teeth as he felt the auras of his kindred snuffed out by the handful, more and more every second. The other Librarians watched it

too. While their lips were silent, their minds were filled with heated congress.

+This is the worst he has been.+

+He will kill hundreds–+

+We must intervene.+

+We must attempt Communion.+

+That's too dangerous!+

+What choice do we have?+ sent the mind of Vorias. The Lectio Primus' was the strongest of them all, drowning out all others until his was alone in each Librarian's thoughts. +He has called for one in ten to die as punishment. If we allow his rage to persist, how many more of our brothers will be killed in vain? We are the only ones who can calm him. There is no time for debate – we must act now!+

One by one, the minds of the Librarius crystallised in assent to the Lectio Primus' command. Tethys joined them in acquiescence, exerting his will to block out the trepidation that threatened to sour his energy. He had studied the ritual, learning of it in scripture and through the tutelage of his superiors, but he had never even witnessed a Communion being performed, let alone actively taken part in its conjuring. As the auras of the psykers bled from their bodies into the air above them, Tethys felt the formidable sixth sense of Vorias focus solely upon him.

+Tethys, follow our lead. Let the eldest of us bear the brunt. Your task is to focus your mind on maintaining the integrity of our union. Yours is not to be the sword, my brother. Be the armour.+

Tethys drew in a deep breath, expelling it in a steamy fog as the temperature around the psykers plummeted. A delicate film of ice crystals bloomed across their armour, merging and layering until they formed sheets of thick ice over the deep blue plates. He knelt to join his kindred, lips working as they repeated mantras used to focus the mind and draw forth the innermost reserves of their power.

+Brothers,+ sent Vorias, the eye of the psychic storm building over their heads. +Begin Communion.+

Tethys felt his spirit rise into the air as it flowed out of him, remaining tethered to his mundane form by only the slightest of threads as he was drunk up into the figure of light that was rapidly coalescing out of the storm. The combined psychic power of the XII Legion Librarius resolved into the form of an ancient warrior that was a match in size to the primarch,

one arm threaded through the spectral disc of a shield, the other holding aloft a blazing torch that bathed the entire Triumphal Hall in an illumination only those with second sight could see.

The Communion streamed forward, surging towards the rampaging Angron's animus, which appeared to the sixth sense as a sphere of howling incandescent fire the colour of dark blood. It passed over the heads of the other World Eaters, frozen in the space outside of time's remit, leaving a trail of glittering ice over the armour of the warriors in its path.

Through the gestalt being, Tethys experienced the souls of his brethren with an intimacy he had never known before. He felt the youngest of them as they struggled like himself to maintain the union, while the most powerful wielded their minds like artificer blades as they fought to ply the depths of their father's enraged mind. Angron railed against their influence, the Butcher's Nails in his skull appearing in the astral plane as a poisonous arachnid shape crouched within him, black as the deepest, darkest void. Tethys watched the implants torture his father more every time he and the Communion touched.

+What are you?+ Angron's mind thrashed at their presence. +Witch-kind. Get away!+ The primarch's mental barriers flared, hurling the Communion back. +No dreams for you to steal, no more love left for you to eat.+

+His fury is too strong,+ sent one part of the gestalt, from the stout mind of an Epistolary. +We cannot hold him.+

+No.+ Vorias' spirit was the steel in the Communion's spine. +We must try again. We will not get another chance to stop this.+

The Librarians refocused their combined projection, advancing slowly again with shield raised high. They spoke to Angron's mind in a chorus of their voices, with the warmth of new light spilling over the land at sunrise.

+We are the Communion, and you are our father. You must cease this, Angron. Your rage is killing your sons.+

*They are not my sons!* Angron's rage smouldered and flared. *They are weaklings foisted upon me. The only family I ever had lies dead, dead when I was stolen from them!*

The Communion weathered the gales of the primarch's anger, leaning into its shield as it pushed itself closer. +You. Must. Stop.+

The closer they came to Angron, the further Tethys was able to glimpse into their father's mind. He saw flickering images and sensations, a lifetime of abuse and horror unravelling and turning back upon itself. An unbroken

cycle of torment that ripped and tore at an already frayed consciousness.

+Tethys, pull back, you must not–+

The light blinded Tethys, drawing him in with an irresistible grasp. His mind snapped loose of the Communion, snatched away and trapped in the gravity of Angron's spirit. Tethys' identity blurred, shivering as he was suddenly–

*–sprinting through snow, rocks slicing a boy's bare feet. The cold burning his bare flesh. Things chasing after him, whispering in an oily, sibilant tongue he cannot understand as they fly through the air. The singing sound of their blades as they cut through the freezing wind–*

*–the shrieking howl of one of the creatures as the boy thrashes beneath it, turning away as the glint of a dagger sings just shy of his throat. His hands find a stone, swinging it with a roar of his own. The shrieking ends with a splash of heat against his face.*

Tethys reeled. His grasp slipped beneath the overwhelming assault crashing over his senses. He felt everything happening as though he were present and participating. The Triumphal Hall began to shrink, the voices of his brother Librarians fading away as he was pulled deeper into the trauma unfolding in the mountain snow. He felt the hot thrill of triumph as–

*–another of the things dies. The boy feels its pain lashing out through its body until he pulls away his touch and it goes still. He can barely keep hold of the stone now, so slick with the blood of the slender monsters that were hunting him. Now, as the boy rises from the corpse, he sees the fear in the other creatures' eyes. He feels it in what beats in place of their hearts. The roles have reversed.*

*The remaining figures vanish, leaving the boy alone in the snow. Steam curls off his body in a rising curtain from pink flesh stinging with cold. Without the threat to focus him, exhaustion and confusion take hold, and the boy sinks to his knees.*

*He hears voices, calling out from beyond sight. They are not the monsters' voices; these are lower, closer to the boy's own when he had cried out in anger and pain as he swung the stone. Shapes materialise from the snow and wind, and a blinding light is shone upon him as they draw near.*

*The stone flies from the boy's hand, and the light disappears with the crack of something sharp and brittle shattering. Shouts ring out from the figures, revealed to be like the boy, but larger and swaddled in thick furs. They clutch strange shining tools in their gloved hands, and they aim them at the*

*boy.*

*He cries out as needles riddle his flesh. Something inside them makes his limbs fill with lead and his eyesight blur. The beating of his heart pounds in his ears, and as he fights to remain standing a heavy net smothers him, dragging him down into the snow as the shouting men crowd around.*

*The boy tries to fight them, to tear himself free of the net, but more needles strike him, and his vision narrows like a closing door.*

*Tethys? Teth–*

'–Tethys?' Vorias wiped the blood from his eyes and knelt beside the young Lexicanum. The rest of his brothers were still reeling, collecting themselves after the supreme effort of bringing Angron down to a state of unconsciousness. With their minds and power joined together to form the gestalt known as the Communion, they had been forced to delve into their father's tortured mind, seeking out one of the primarch's memories to induce such a state in him and halt his rampage.

Vorias had needed to wield one of Angron's own memories against him, a time from long ago when he was captured and rendered unconscious, used to trick his body into falling into the same condition now. Tethys had stared into the memory too deeply, and as he brushed his senses across his younger brother's, Vorias saw that he had failed to return from it.

Not all of the Librarians had risen after the connection was broken. Nearly a third of the assembled psykers were slumped over in death, their soulfire fully expended by the act. Tethys yet lived, but lay bleeding and convulsing upon the deck of the Triumphal Hall.

Vorias poured his thoughts over his young brother. While his conscious mind was absent, disconnected from his mundane flesh, his power still remained. A psyker's skills were deadly things, in constant need of control and temperance, and without a will to leash them, they threatened to boil out and wreck irrevocable harm upon everything around him. The other-senior members of their order set aside their crippling exhaustion, gathering with Vorias to support him in containing Tethys' power from lashing out beyond all control.

Thudding bootsteps alerted Vorias to an approaching figure, forcing him to draw a measure of his awareness back into the mundane world. He looked up to see the crested helm of a centurion staring at him. The warrior was covered in blood, the dried brown of the Ghennan fluid now overlaid with

the bright red lifeblood of the brothers Angron had butchered in his uncouth rage.

‘What,’ Mago said, then paused, his voice betraying the exhaustion of fighting to contain their primarch. He pulled his helmet free, the face beneath pale and tense. ‘What happened to him, Vorias?’

‘We formed the Communion,’ answered the psyker. ‘That is what stopped our father.’ He gestured to the dead Librarians littering the deck around them. ‘Many died to do it, but Tethys yet lives. His mind, though, now lies in two places at once. It is tethered both in his own flesh and Angron’s mind.’

Tethys bucked, his limbs twitching. The young Lexicanum’s lips mouthed silent words, his eyes darting back and forth beneath closed eyelids. Tiny worms of silver fire danced between his fingertips, quickly snuffed out as Vorias placed a hand upon his chest.

‘What can we do?’ asked Mago.

Vorias blinked away the tears of blood drying in his eyes. ‘I do not know. This has never happened before, Mago. I cannot simply utter some incantation and drag him back into himself.’

‘Is he a danger?’ Mago’s hand strayed close to his volkite serpenta.

‘No.’ Vorias shook his head, the small motion alone enough to make his head swim. ‘No, we can contain him.’ He sighed. ‘Think of it as though Tethys’ mind is lost at sea. We must watch over his body here and leash his strength, until he washes back onto shore.’

Mago sank to his haunches, running a hand down his face. He looked across the Triumphal Hall, watching a broken brotherhood try to piece itself back together, backing away from a prone demigod ringed by the bodies of his dead children.

‘We will take him back to the *Hound’s Tooth*,’ said the centurion as he stood, his ragged cloak scraping against the deck plating. ‘He’ll be safe there. You can come with us.’

‘Yes.’ Vorias gave a nod. ‘I will watch over him.’

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# PART TWO

## FORGOTTEN TRUTHS

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*‘I have heard it said that the Twelfth is beyond trust. This is ridiculous of course, a false claim made by those who mistake “trust” for “control”. Within the bounds of their own misperception, they are correct. We cannot be collared, not before Angron, and certainly not after.*

*‘To truly trust a thing is to understand its nature. Doing so is simple enough, just as one can trust fire to burn. In this regard, our Legion is the foremost of all in trustworthiness. Because across the length and breadth of this galaxy, no matter where you might find him, you can trust that a World Eater is doing but one of two things: he is either making war, or he is readying himself to do so.’*

– Gahlan Surlak, Apothecary of the XII Legion

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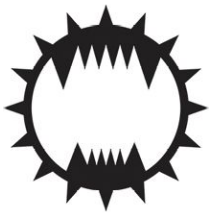

# TEN

*Tethys watches through the eyes of the boy who finds himself standing in a pit alongside a hundred other people. They are clothed in sackcloth rags, many with iron manacles still circling their ankles and wrists. Slavers' brands mark their flesh, puckered and raw from their recent touch. Some shift and dart their eyes back and forth, whispering in low frightened voices, but most crane their necks upwards at the immense metal ziggurat they are crowded around. The boy sees every nick and pit in the worn iron steps.*

*Noise batters over them from a roaring crowd, surrounding the slaves from a tiered amphitheatre that rises from behind high stone walls. The air above the pit is filled with strange metal spheres about the size of a man's ribcage. They buzz and click and chatter at each other in the same tongue the men who captured the boy had used, but where theirs had been deep and gruff, the voices coming from the flying drones are thin, preening and argumentative.*

*Horns blare from around the edge of the pit, and the crowd erupts in cheers. Large circular vents built into the sides of the walls twist open, and a torrent of brackish liquid sluices down onto the ground. The tang of the fluid fills the boy's nose, and he sees the fumes curl from it as it rushes across the floor of the pit.*

*A woman screams as she is the first to come into contact with it. She jumps back as the flesh of her foot sizzles. People begin scrambling up onto the first step of the ziggurat as the entire floor is covered. The pyramid is now an island, slowly shrinking as the volume of caustic water issuing from the vents increases and the bottom steps disappear beneath the rising pool.*

*At first, the slaves help each other, holding out their hands to haul their fellows higher up the ziggurat as the water rises over the steps one by one. They scream up at the throng cheering over their suffering, and most fiercely at the buzzing spheres that flit around them, intently watching their faces with braces of whirring lenses. The boy begins to understand the meaning of his fellow captives' words, though he has no inkling how. They call the talking silver orbs* maggot's eyes.

*The flow does not cease, even after the vents themselves are submerged, still pumping more of the toxic floor into the pit. The ziggurat shrinks, and the space available to stand upon is quickly overtaken by the number of people struggling to remain on it. Packed together tighter and desperate, it is easy to lose one's balance on the slick metal.*

*The first of them falls into the water. The corrosive acid mixed into it is potent enough to dissolve flesh and bone into slurry, but not immediately. The man's screams are a sound unlike any the boy has ever heard, an agony so intense that it causes him physical pain. The noise of the crowd is a near tangible thing, as they exult in watching the man slowly boil away to nothing.*

*The other slaves grow quiet now. For the first time, they begin to look at one another not as human beings, kindred victims of this sadistic savagery, but as obstacles to reaching the safety of the increasingly smaller steps above. They have become opponents, enemies, standing in the way of living just a little longer. A new smell prickles at the boy's nose, as the acidic water laps at the edge of the stair he stands on.*

*Panic.*

*Five steps from the top, the captives begin to kill each other. The screams spike louder as they jostle, shove and wrestle each other into the water.*

*Some try to scramble up the steps alone, only to be seized by those beneath them and hurled to their deaths. Humanity abandons them, replaced by the frothing animal instinct to survive, all set to the ovations of the crowd.*

*The boy struggles against the heaving mass of frenzied slaves around him. He is easily stronger than any of them despite his size, and even several of them working in concert fail to pull him towards the edge. The urge to lash out and send them falling into the mire builds inside him, fuelled by screaming faces and the utter senselessness that surrounds him. The choice to fight feels right, deep in the marrow of his bones, and he knows instinctively how best to imbalance, disable and overcome every one of the other slaves. It would be so easy.*

*But he fights it.*

*Every time one of the slaves hits the water, it hurts him. He doesn't understand how, or why. As more and more are killed it merges into a lightning storm behind his eyes, amplified by the grasping, clawing hands and gnashing teeth tearing at his skin. He fights against the environment that has ensnared him and not his fellow man, using only enough force to keep his footing without throwing those attacking him off. He fights not to kill, but only to survive.*

*Of the hundred men and women who had been herded to the base of the ziggurat, only a dozen remain. There is only the final step left above them, and it is only wide enough for a single person to stand on.*

*The water is now a blurry pink sludge of decomposing humanity. The stink is indescribable, and more of the slaves fight with vomit stringing their teeth than without. A skull stares up at the boy from the surface as the flesh wrapping it melts away into a brownish-red slick. There is no longer any choice left for the child. He has reached the point where, against his will, he must end the lives around him to survive.*

*The boy goes to great lengths to minimise the suffering he inflicts, nearly losing his own life time and again as he snaps necks and crushes skulls so that the only things that splash into the sludge are corpses. The last of them, a big brute of a man, beats his fists bloody against the boy, until in his anger the child wrenches him down, and the air fills with the sounds of agony.*

*The man is only half submerged. His torso, head and arms remain above the surface of the acid, wildly clutching at the boy's legs. His strength evaporates, his eyes wide and unfocused with the inconceivable pain of*

*everything below his waist boiling into nothing. Tears stream down the boy's face as he kicks the man back, the screams only stopping when he finally sinks beneath.*

*The water stops at the edge of the last stair, just shy of spilling over onto it. Shaking, his body covered in scratches and pebbled by acid splashes, the boy looks up as the lone survivor, and the crowd roars.*

*The maggot's eyes descend around him in a halo of buzzing silver orbs. Speaker grilles built into their casings squeal and crackle to life. 'Behold! People of Desh'ea, for your coin and happiness we have a victor! We present this boy, who has won the Devil's Tears! Which house has wagered their coin on his victory, and thus has won them to their stable?'*

*One of the maggot's eyes clunks and chatters. Its voice scratches from the brass grille set into its face, soured by bitterness. 'It is House Thal'kr.'*

*'House Thal'kr,' the other eye grumbles, 'of course. Well then, my child, what do you call yourself?'*

*A prod extends from the maggot's eye, sending an electric shock over the boy. 'Answer, whelp!'*

*The boy stares back, wide-eyed. The eyes float back from him a fraction.*

*'Nameless, how quaint. Wherever was this creature found, and from what people?'*

*'He was found alone, atop the summit of the northern mountains.'*

*'Ah, the perilous heights, whose cold winds and driven snow mask a volcano's fury. Charmingly apropos, in this case! We name thee Angron, then, "Child of the Mountain" in the old tongue. Behold! Angron-Thal'kr, your newest combatant and soon to join the games and spill blood upon the red sands for your amusement! But will it be the blood of his foes that is shed, or his very own? You will have to pay for the privilege to see, my friends!'*

*His lips shaking, the boy somehow wills his tongue to shape words, for the first time. 'This… is…* game*?'*

*The eyes swarm closer, orbiting him.*

*'Ah, Angron speaks! Pay me, Dur'han.'*

*'Perhaps not such a simpleton as we thought!'*

*'Speak again, little thing! Who will wager on what it says next?'*

*The boy they named Angron lunges at the nearest maggot's eye, grabbing hold of it with both hands as the others scatter. The orb sputters as it pulls back, lifting him from his feet and dragging him to hang precariously over*

*the toxic swill. A wave of curiosity washes over the crowd, every eye watching intently to see what will happen. Angron snarls, pulling himself up to try to force the robotic sphere down with his weight.*

*Electricity surges out from the maggot's eye, locking Angron's limbs. His fingers release the drone, which twists just as he loses his grip, throwing him back atop the ziggurat. Applause is mixed with mutters of bitterness at being deprived of the sight of the boy's death, as the audience begins to file out of the arena.*

*'Ah, this one has passion! Still some strength within you yet, eh?' It sends another wave of electricity through Angron's prone form.*

*The drone hovers closer, until its chittering lenses are but a hand's span from the boy's face. 'That is very good, Angron-Thal'kr. You will need all the strength in the world for what we have waiting for you.'*

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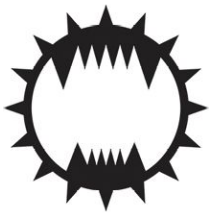

# ELEVEN

The Legion dispersed, scattering company by company to their ships across the fleet. Bodies were identified, gene-seed harvested and wargear stripped and sent to armouries for salvage or repair. Those assigned to the *Conqueror* saw to Angron, dragging him back to the depths of his hall under Khârn's watchful eye.

Angron's outburst had paralysed the World Eaters. While Gahlan Surlak and Vel-Kheredar laboured over his unconscious form, seeking to repair the damage to his implants and thus glean more knowledge for their own experiments in replicating them, the Legion waited, unsure of what to do next as they licked their wounds.

Ghenna turned in silence beneath the fleet. Orbital surveillance picts recorded the population as it went out across the surface, gathering up their slaughtered kin and taking them back within their cities. Hour by hour they steadily returned their world to an image of uncanny normalcy, with any sign that there had been an invasion melting away.

Mago walked the corridors of the *Hound's Tooth*. The hours since the Triumphal Hall had been a gauntlet as he took stock of the 18th and the losses they had suffered. Entire squads were gone, lost either to the surface conflict or to Angron. Others had to be collapsed and folded into one another, and decisions needed to be made as to who would lead them. More often than not, the question of leadership was being decided in the pits.

Normally Mago would have forbidden such means, especially as the Legion was still on an active war footing, but in light of recent events he relented. His brothers needed the grounded calm that duelling could bring, an outlet to exorcise their frustration and rage. Warriors would need to forge new bonds and have trust in the prowess of their leaders, and bleeding together in the pits was a better way to accomplish this than most.

'Hail, centurion,' said Orontes, emerging into the corridor to walk by Mago's side.

'My First Axe.' Mago dipped his head. 'How is our brother? Has his condition changed since I left?'

'He remains catatonic,' Orontes answered. 'They still have him under observation in the tertiary apothecarion, closed off from the rest of the ship in case, well…'

In their sealed armour, the World Eaters were able to walk across a ragged wound in the strike cruiser's side, where Iocare's experimentation with the Butcher's Nails had ended as a crater blasted open to the void the size of a Warhound Titan. The entire secondary apothecarion was gone, and portions of nine decks had needed to be sealed off after they – and everyone within them at the time of the explosion – had been vented out into the void.

The magnetised plates in their boots anchored them to the deck in a stiff, plodding gait. Tethered construction servitors and repair crew in thick rubberised suits hurried about in the vacuum, cutting away the remnants of slagged armour plating and installing the support lattices that would hold up the new armour and hull plates to cover the damage.

'I never should have allowed Iocare to do it here,' grumbled Mago as he watched twisted pieces of the *Hound's Tooth* spin away as discarded wreckage. 'It wasn't enough that the fool had to be from my own ranks, but he had to blow a damn hole in my ship too.'

Orontes caught a chip of ablative ceramite hanging in the void. He turned it in his hand, brushing away the veil of ice crystals clinging to it with his thumb. It still bore the clean white lacquer of the Legion, though scoured

and blackened by unnatural fire. ‘It was right to have it done here, even after all that had happened. Iocare was Unbroken. His loyalty to the Legion and the primarch’s vision did not fail. Only the machine they created for him did.’

Mago glanced at his brother. One way or another, every warrior in the Legion idolised Angron, in spite of everything, but few more so than his First Axe.

‘You still want us to take the Nails, don’t you?’

‘Of course,’ Orontes replied at once. The champion had been one of the most outspoken proponents within the 18th of replicating the ways of the primarch. He argued fiercely in favour of the implantation of the Butcher’s Nails across the Legion, despite the objections of Mago and others within the XII.

‘Brother.’ Orontes stopped. Mago turned back, his boots clunking with magnetic fusion as he stood with his champion in the vacuum.

‘Back on the surface,’ said Orontes, speaking slowly as he considered each word. ‘On Ghenna, you chose to reinforce the Forty-Fourth instead of pushing on. Nobility demanded it of you, your sense of sentiment. But if we had possessed the Nails, I know we would not have wavered. If we had been like our father, there is no doubt in my mind that the Legion would have achieved victory. If the primarch had been there, he never would have stopped. Hesitation, nobility, sentiment – Angron has none of these. These are the things that are becoming like a sheath around us, smothering a blade that has grown desperate to cast it off. How can you not see that?’

Mago did not answer Orontes straight away. He was not blind to his champion’s feelings, for they were becoming the predominant thought in the Legion with each passing day. The defeats, the executions, the shame cast upon them all by Angron – all were torturing the World Eaters. Shame was driving them towards a future that none of them fully understood. The XII was changing, no matter how tightly Mago held to the ways of the War Hounds. No matter how much he wished, he could not hold back the tide forever.

But as long as he could hold it, Mago would.

‘It seems,’ said Mago, ‘that you will have to be patient before you can have the Nails pounding madness through your brain, my brother.’

Orontes shrugged, releasing the armour fragment to slowly drift beyond his reach. ‘Soon enough.’

The two World Eaters slipped back within the pressurised innards of the *Hound's Tooth* via a secondary airlock, stooping to make passage through the low circular hatchway. Orontes removed his helm after the bulkhead sealed and repressurised, running a hand over his broad, scarred features.

'I hope you come to understand the path that is laid before us, brother.' He laid a hand on Mago's shoulder. 'History never remembers those who hold tight to the past, only those who moved us forward. Angron will wake, and then what will he do? What will you do?'

Mago made to answer him when his vox-bead chimed. He paused, waving Orontes away and watching his First Axe vanish down the corridor as a familiar voice crackled in his ear.

'*I'm aboard. Come, I will meet you in the pits.*'

Khârn was waiting for Mago as he arrived in the duelling pits, standing just inside watching a pair of Unbroken as they finished their contest. Mago heard their roars of exuberance from the corridor, and the scent of fresh blood filled his nose as the doorway rumbled aside.

Two World Eaters were in the pit, their bare flesh bleeding and sheened with sweat. Mago saw weapons forgotten on the sand, their edges bloody. The two Space Marines shouted wordlessly back and forth, ramming their heads together like tribal primitives. Mago did not recognise two of his vaunted Unbroken, for to him they looked like nothing more than death world savages.

'What foolishness is this?' Mago snapped. 'We remain on an active war footing, lest you forget. You, return to your squad. And you,' he pointed to the other World Eater, 'get to the apothe-carion, now.'

The first warrior saluted, a fist thudding against his heart. The other simply stiffened his posture, not saluting because his right arm ended at the elbow. They held for a moment before passing the pair of centurions and leaving the pits.

Khârn knelt in the sand, brushing his fingers over the dappling of blood that pooled black in the low light. He lifted the severed arm from the ground, turning it over as he inspected it. After a moment he tossed it beyond the boundary of the pit, to be gathered up and dealt with by a maintenance servitor.

Khârn strode over to a weapons rack as Mago approached, pacing to limber up as he took a training axe in each fist. 'I was beginning to think

you'd had enough for one day.'

'I wanted to ensure there were no complications as Tethys was installed,' Mago replied, eyeing his brother as he made sweeping cuts with the axes. In truth he was grateful for the distraction from the events down on Ghenna and then in the Triumphal Hall. Like any of his brothers, Mago had always been closest to a state of serenity when he had a blade in his hand and an opponent standing across from him. 'I wanted to ensure that his condition was stabilised, and contained.'

'Any more of your Librarians explode, and you won't have any ship left.'

'Careful now.' Mago pulled his tunic over his head and tossed it to a waiting serf as he stepped onto the sand. 'Or I'll set Orontes on you.'

Khârn chuckled. 'I like Orontes. Were you there when he took Centurion Kaeptra to third blood?'

'The Red? I was there. How do you think he became my First Axe?'

'Maybe I should duel him instead,' said Khârn. He threw one of the axes to Mago. 'If all you intend to do is talk.'

Mago smiled as he caught the axe and spun it to loosen his wrists. 'Then come, Eater of Worlds, and match words with deeds.'

The two warriors circled barefoot in the sand. Absent was the sullen stoicism of the First, or the preening dance of the Third. The World Eaters duelled because in their hearts they knew that nothing forged a stronger bond of brotherhood than fighting. There was no need for pageantry, and no reason to hold back. Rank was disregarded, and all that mattered was the weapons in their hands, and who struck first.

'First blood,' said Mago, twisting his neck to relieve a kink with a soft crack.

'Tired, Mago?'

Khârn lunged, attacking Mago with a series of lightning fast strikes. Their axes clashed in ringing clangs of conflicting steel as Mago countered, leaning into the blows and refusing to back down and surrender the initiative. Leaping out of reach of each other's strikes, the two brothers broke away and resumed circling.

'You crossed a line today,' said Khârn. 'Had I not been there myself, I would not have believed you survived speaking to the primarch that way.'

'I survived,' said Mago. 'But many did not.'

Khârn gave a slight shrug. 'You cannot hold yourself to account for what happened. A centurion bears the weight of the lives lost under his

command, and that is enough for any soul. Even if some might choose to lay those Angron killed today at your feet.'

'It had to be said, Khârn.' Mago stopped. 'The countdowns, the decimations – it cannot go on. We will grind ourselves away to nothing out here, and more of us will end up dying to sate Angron than on the field of battle.'

'The Legion is changing,' said Khârn. He lunged, crashing into Mago's guard with an overhead chop. They broke off again in a shriek of metal, measuring each other in the sand. 'Can't you feel it?'

'All of us can,' replied Mago. 'The question is, is it changing for the better? Is *he* changing it for the better?'

'He,' said Khârn coldly, 'is our primarch, and we are his sons. We live and die by his whim. He does not owe us anything, Mago.'

Mago stopped at that. 'You're talking about the Nails, aren't you?'

Khârn came to a halt across from him. 'They are inevitable, brother.'

'I have a hole in my ship that begs to differ with you, Khârn.'

'Maybe so.' The captain of the Eighth flashed a tired grin. 'But every day Surlak and Vel-Kheredar get closer to replicating a construction stable enough to be hammered into the Legion. And when that day comes, they will be.'

'I cannot see how the Legion would accept them.' Mago shook his head. 'Not after witnessing what they do to Angron. Not after today.'

Khârn tossed his axe idly between his hands. 'Not all see it as you do. Remember that we are weapons, Mago. Most in the Legion do not look past the blade in their fists. They watch our father, the way he fights. You've seen him. He is a storm, unbeatable no matter what is standing against him. He just does not lose. Tell me you believe none of our kin would seek that strength for themselves, and I will call you a liar.'

The brothers jumped at each other, the axes splitting the air as each sought to dodge rather than block. They weaved around each other, with blows sliding just shy of opening flesh and drawing first blood.

'But strength at what cost?' Mago leaned back to overextend Khârn and hammered a foot into the equerry's chest, sending him sprawling. 'I have seen him turn the tide of every battle we have fought with him, that is undeniable. But I have also seen him before those battles, and after them. The crazed months during transit, the screaming that comes from his sanctum, the swathes of crew that go missing whenever he walks the

*Conqueror*’s lower decks.’

Mago loomed over Khârn as he rose to a crouch. ‘If you are asking me to deny that an entire Legion infused with the Nails would be the most potent force in the known galaxy, I will not. But if that is to be our future, Khârn, see all of it. A future with each of us in chains, senseless with rage. No longer deployed into battle, but loosed into it.’

Khârn coughed, looking up at Mago. ‘Have you considered that, perhaps, it would be better that way?’

‘What?’ asked Mago. ‘How can you wish such a thing upon us?’

Khârn rose, considering his next words. ‘The planet beneath us – when you look at it, what do you see?’

Mago scoffed. ‘Still, after all these years, you lecture me as though a child.’

‘And it would be a simple task for me to change, provided you cease to act as though you are one,’ Khârn pressed. ‘Tell me, what do you see?’

Mago lowered his axe, looking at the far wall of the chamber as though it were a window to the planet they now orbited. ‘I see a world, and an estranged humanity that it is our duty to return to the fold.’

‘No.’ Khârn shook his head slowly. ‘That is not what it is. What we have found is a foetid, rotting forest. A withered canopy that smothers the soil and drowns out all light. Choking vines strangle new growth. We are the fire that burns this forest to the ground. One that razes it utterly and without compunction. Because, brother, ash is the most fertile foundation for the future to spring from.’

Mago made to respond, but Khârn raised a hand and closed the distance between them.

‘Answer me this – if the Legion took the Nails, every one of us, what would it truly change, Mago? Would it alter our mandate to conquer the galaxy? Would it render any of our weapons or methods of war impossible, or obsolete? Would it change the inexorable certainty that every one of us is destined to die upon a battlefield, wherever it might be?’

‘The Nails will not change any of those things,’ Mago conceded with a shallow nod. ‘That is true enough, but they would change how the Imperium and the other Legions view us. They will misunderstand us, they will fear us, perhaps they will even hate us.’

‘But these are not our concerns to bear,’ said Khârn. ‘We serve a different purpose to the others. We do what they cannot do, or will not do. We are the

firestorm, Mago, the cleansing sweep of utter extermination to any who challenge the vision of this empire we are forging. We have left none alive, and we never will. There is purity in that. There is nobility in that.’

Mago raised his axe, the edge clanging against Khârn’s. For several minutes they fought in the sand, the only sounds the ringing of blades and their low, bated breathing.

‘There is no nobility in being a monster.’

Khârn hauled his axe aside, hooking Mago’s and leaving him exposed. Mago’s head snapped back as Khârn’s fist cracked against his jaw, knocking him down to the ground.

‘The real problem,’ panted Khârn, ‘is that you still believe you are human.’

Mago shook his head to clear the blurring in his vision. He cast about around him in search of his axe, reaching out when he found it. Khârn’s foot crashed down, pinning his hand beneath it.

‘He is our primarch, Mago,’ said Khârn. ‘It is his blood that flows through us. He is our destiny.’

‘He is broken,’ Mago spat from his knees as he jerked his hand free. ‘Blood-mad, tortured. And you would see us follow him in such a fate. These ships that bear us across the stars, the armour we wear, our weapons, we own none of these things. When we die, they are passed down, taken up by those that come after us. Is there nothing then that only we truly possess? Nothing that belongs to us, even the choice of our fate?’

A soft patter struck the sand. Khârn looked down at his fist, and the blood trickling from split knuckles. He snorted, a soft sound between a laugh and a sigh, and dropped his axe to the ground. ‘Brother, you speak as though we have ever had any choice at all.’

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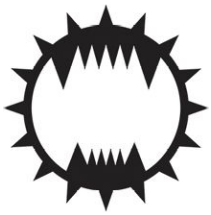

# TWELVE

*Tethys' senses focus in a wash of stimuli. Grunts and banging hammers fill his ears. The stink of forge fires, dirt, blood and unwashed bodies. He looks down to see a battered iron helm in his hands, the metal warped after repeatedly being hammered crudely back into some semblance of shape.*

*No.*

*It is not in Tethys' hands. It is in Angron's.*

*'Oy,' a voice calls out. Angron looks up into the scarred chest of a gladiator slave. The man reaches out with one mailed fist and takes the helmet. 'Ol' Cuneglas wore that pot last.'*

*The gladiator scrapes his fingers along the inside of the helm, flashing an ugly, gap-toothed grin as he peels a handful of hair and scalp from it. 'He die. Not well. Not quick. Pray his shade gone, you avoid the same.'*

*Angron catches the helmet as the gladiator lumbers away, chuckling as he eats the scraps the dead man left behind.*

*Armoured walking machines clank around the slave fighters, lightning*

*dancing from the tips of their electro prods. They have been released from the caves up a tunnel into a dark anteroom, with another tunnel leading out the other side. It is empty but for a wide wooden table and a few racks laden with decrepit weapons and armour. The smartest and most experienced gladiators rush to claim the most prized wargear, snatching up axes and tridents, hissing at one another as they lay mail and scale armour over their bodies.*

*Angron has not left the caves since the Devil's Tears. He knows nothing of these warriors in chains or their ways. By the time he reaches the table everything of use has been taken, leaving Angron with only the helmet. He looks inside, still smelling the blood of its past wearer, and pulls it over his head.*

*The machines begin to speak, squawking in the masters' tongue that Angron is slowly beginning to understand. Many of the words are a mystery, but he hears 'hot dust', before they form a wall behind the gladiators and march them forward into the tunnel ahead at the point of their crackling prods.*

*There is a door, thrice the height of the biggest of the gladiators, at the end of the tunnel. With short stabs of their weapons the machines force them towards it, with Angron in the centre of the mob. The further down the passage they go, vibrations begin to course from the ground and walls. Muffled sounds reach their ears. They almost sound like drums. Drums and screaming voices.*

*Dust and sand spills from cracks in the ceiling above. The gladiators begin to roar, beating fists against their chests and ramming their heads together in clangs of battered steel. Angron squints through the warped t-visor of his helm as the great doors open in a spill of light and sound.*

*'Die well,' says the gap-toothed gladiator, looking back at Angron with his ugly smile.*

*They are driven forward into the light, and Angron is out in the arena again, the same one where he had endured the Devil's Tears. The pyramid has vanished, and any trace of the burning water is gone. All that stretches before him is a bowl of sunbaked earth, cracked and coated in wisps of gritty dust.*

*They are surrounded by thousands upon thousands of people, more than there were to watch the slaves die climbing the pyramid, packed into towering banks of tiered seating until they are full to bursting. Their voices*

*are so loud they kick up curtains of the searing dust across the arena floor. Angron can feel the unrestrained fervour of the crowd, a monumental lust for blood.*

*The man next to Angron dies before his eyes have adjusted to the light. Hot blood splashes his face, nearly blinding him as he leaps back from the falling corpse. The strongest of the gladiators have formed into a pack, isolating and butchering the weak and poorly armed slaves that stand upon the hot dust with them.*

*The fighter closest to Angron swings his axe at him with a roar. But the strike is slow, incredibly slow, and Angron is able to sidestep it as well as the three overhand slashes that follow it. He can see the fatigue already leeching into the man's arms, the sweat prickling out across his flesh, turning the dust coating it into a chalky film. He weaves aside once more, waiting for the gladiator to overextend himself, and allows instinct to take control.*

*Angron punches, a short thrust at the man's heart. Bones flex against his knuckles before collapsing with a cluster of muffled snaps. The air is driven out of the man's lungs, the last breath he will ever take. Angron's blow makes a pit out of the gladiator's chest, and as he withdraws his fist the fighter drops in a tumble of twitching limbs. Angron pries the axe loose from his clutching fingers, turning in time to block a descending strike from a spiked maul.*

*He cannot hear the crowd clearly as he fights. They are a distant roar, like an ocean crashing against the shoreline, and he feels them like heat against his back. The heat flares every time his axe takes a life.*

*Tethys feels the blood coat his chest and arms, the syrupy trickle as it drips from his chin. He experiences the child's sensations as if they are his own, from the jarring impact as the head of the axe cleaves into a skull to the deep, black sting that wells up in his chest with the pain of every butchered foe.*

*The last of the other gladiators is thrown to the ground. Weapon-less he snarls a curse, trying to crawl away through the hot dust. Angron stands over him, feeling the desperation and fear rippling off the scarred veteran of countless death-matches. He is the gap-toothed warrior from the arming chamber. This makes Angron hesitate for a moment, and he doesn't see the knife until it is buried to the hilt in his gut.*

*The blade is cold inside Angron. The pain follows before his heart gives*

*another beat, and the anger follows that. A kick sends the gladiator sprawling, and Angron pulls the blade free and throws it aside into the dust. The crowd's shapeless howl becomes uniform, calling him by name.*

'ANGRON! ANGRON! ANGRON!'

*The weapon is light in Angron's hands, like it was always meant to be there. The hesitation is gone. His blood is thunder in his ears, and he swings the axe.*

*The vision wavers. Blackness boils up from the ground, swallowing Tethys in a surge of disorientation. He feels himself disintegrating as he is cast about, his fragile notion of self unravelling into nothing bit by bit, before things snap back into focus.*

*The arena is gone. Tethys feels cool air on skin that is not his own, and hears the soft patter of moisture dripping from above him. There is an almost complete absence of light, yet through his father's eyes he can see his surroundings clearly.*

*Men and women are huddled together across the floor of a cave, wearing the tattered clothes and manacles of slaves. He hears low voices, and people crying out in their sleep.*

*An older man is sitting beside Angron, his face an overlapping network of old scars crested by patches of a steel-coloured beard. He offers Angron a rag, and the youth accepts it to wipe the dust and congealed blood from his face.*

*Tethys does not know how much time has passed since Angron's axe fell. His sense of time within the memories is curdled, disjointed. His father is bigger now, stronger, and the words that had confounded him in the arena now flow with ease from his lips.*

*'Who are these people, Oenomaus?' Angron hisses. He glares up at the ceiling of the cave, as though he can stare through it all the way to the arena above. 'What kind of monsters are they, who come here to revel in our agony?'*

*'Monsters.' The old fighter whom Angron calls Oenomaus gives a soft smile that does not match his twisted mask of old wounds. 'You are the mountain child, yes? Never seen anything other than that peak, and these caves, and the hot dust. You've never seen where these "monsters" go to lay their heads. The lives they find themselves having to live.'*

*Oenomaus shifts, groaning as his protesting joints pop before settling back down beside Angron. 'I have. I was born into it, the slums, the desperation*

*they breed. Waking each day to fight with too many others over less than there was the day before. Feeling trapped.' He shakes his fist, sending a rattle through his chains. 'Just as surely as we are here.*

*'Sometimes…' He lays a hand on Angron's shoulder. 'Sometimes what you need more than anything in the world is to know that there is someone lower than you. That no matter how dark it may seem, you're not at the absolute bottom. It isn't much, but people take power where they can in this world to survive. Watching us die while they still get to live, it's all the power they'll ever have.'*

*Oenomaus frowns, and withdraws his hand. He looks down, slowly flexing his fingers. His eyes flick back to Angron.*

*'So, no, Angron,' Oenomaus says after a moment, lowering his hand into his lap. 'Those people aren't monsters. Spare them your anger, because there are more than enough real monsters that deserve it.'*

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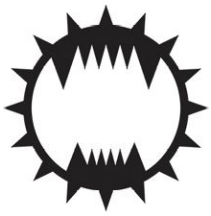

# THIRTEEN

‘Will he die?’

In the cold, sterile light of the *Conqueror*’s primary apothecarion, Gahlan Surlak tore his attention from Angron’s comatose form, flicking his eyes up at Khârn and glaring at him in irritation. ‘If you are going to linger here, Khârn, then at least make an attempt to be of use.’

‘Will. He. Die?’ Khârn repeated, more forcefully this time. He leaned his knuckles against the side of the slab Angron lay upon, opposite Gahlan.

The Apothecary sighed as he straightened, the arms of his chirurgeon folding against his back. ‘Yes, I suppose he might eventually, Khârn, as all mortal things must. But now, in this case, I feel quite confident that he will survive.’

‘What happened to him?’ asked Khârn. He looked down, watching the primarch twitch, his eyes darting back and forth beneath closed lids, his metal teeth catching the light of surgical lumens when facial tics peeled his lips back in a snarl.

‘Perhaps I am not the correct person to ask,’ said Gahlan, looking back over his shoulder at the blue-armoured World Eater standing at the rear of the hall.

Vorias had returned to the *Conqueror* as soon as he had seen Tethys installed and stable aboard the *Hound’s Tooth*. Even with Angron indisposed and unconscious, the Lectio Primus kept his distance in a gesture of respect. Vorias doubted he would have been allowed anywhere near the primarch anyway, after the Triumphal Hall.

‘Speak, Vorias,’ said Khârn as he strode from the slab towards the Librarian. ‘What manner of sorcery did you unleash to do this?’

‘Only what was required,’ answered Vorias softly, ‘to stop him from killing any more of us.’

‘Not good enough,’ said Khârn, stopping a pace away from Vorias. ‘Tell me what you have done to him.’

Vorias met Khârn’s gaze. ‘My brothers and I formed a Communion, a gestalt of our minds, and went to Angron in order to calm him. We tried to enter his mind, and search through his memories for a time when he was composed, if not tranquil, and trick his body into thinking it was then. If we were able to guide him to a more subdued state, we could restore order.’

‘Then what happened?’ Khârn looked back at Angron. ‘This sleep is no natural thing. It is a result of you, you and your kind.’

‘One of us.’ Vorias’ mind returned to Tethys, thrashing on the deck of the Triumphal Hall as Angron fell. ‘Something happened to him. His mind, or part of it, became trapped within Angron’s. The disruption of that event has locked both of them away, where they cannot control their mundane bodies.’

‘For how long?’

Vorias shook his head. ‘Days, weeks, it is impossible to say. But in some fashion, they are linked, the two of them.’

‘The Eighteenth’s psyker,’ said Khârn. ‘Tethys, what of him then?’

‘He is the same as Angron,’ said Vorias. ‘I cannot say with certainty when he might awaken from whatever this may be, or what we could do to rouse them.’

Vorias tilted his head to peer over Khârn’s shoulder. ‘If you would permit me, I can attempt to–’

Khârn placed a hand on Vorias’ chest, remaining rooted between the Lectio Primus and the primarch. ‘You believe you haven’t done enough

already?’

‘Khârn,’ pressed Vorias. ‘Allow me a single minute with him. Let me peer into his thoughts, to see the state of him and if it is possible for us to help him back. If anything can be done by the Art, am I not oathbound to do so for our father?’

Gahlan watched the interplay between his two brothers. He played his narthecium gauntlet over Angron, scanning the diagnostic information gleaned from the primarch’s restless sleep. He checked the gorgon’s crest of diodes and scanning mechadendrites he had attached to Angron’s implants, soaking up every scrap of information about their workings while he had the chance. ‘Let him try, then.’

Khârn shot the Apothecary a surprised glance. ‘I would have hardly expected you to come to his aid, Gahlan.’

Gahlan shrugged. ‘The Lectio Primus’ proposal is not without merit. The primarch’s affliction is more than simply physiological. If sorcery rendered father into this state, perhaps that is the only means to drag him out of it.’

Flicking his eyes down to Angron and then back to Vorias, Khârn studied the Librarian for a moment, before lowering his hand. ‘One minute, nothing more.’

Vorias bowed at the neck to Khârn, stepping around him and approaching the slab where Angron lay. He whispered under his breath, murmuring a mantra to focus his mind upon a single task. The Lectio Primus studied the aura of his gene-sire, still a smouldering haze of anger even comatose. The Butcher’s Nails were still as they always appeared to him, a crown of black fire that wound its tendrils through every inch of his father’s spirit.

Gahlan Surlak stepped back from the slab, ordering the cadre of medical servitors hovering over Angron away. He joined Khârn to stand a pace behind Vorias. The Eighth Captain shifted, the tension clear in his posture, his hands never straying far from the weapons that hung at his belt.

All eyes were locked upon the blue-armoured World Eater as he came to a halt beside Angron. Distrust and suspicion radiated from his Legion kin, while a clinical detachment ebbed from the altered minds of the Mechanicum adepts. Vorias raised his mental wards, pushing the encroaching thoughts of those surrounding him away and concentrating solely on the demigod on the slab.

Vorias drew in a deep breath, expelling it as heated mist as the air around him chilled. With an effort not unlike stretching one’s arms, the Lectio

Primus reached out beyond himself, channelling a questing pulse of his mind through his palm as he held it over Angron's chest.

The lights in the apothecarion flickered. A high-pitched whine scratched at their ears before the lumens exploded in a cloud of sparks and glass fragments. The only light in the room came from Vorias, as lightning the colour of a sky at dusk rippled over his armour.

Angron went into convulsions as the energy touched him, his bound limbs nearly tearing the reinforced bindings from the slab. Vorias' hand shot back from the primarch, locking tightly into a fist.

'Get away from him, witch!' Khârn shoved Vorias away. The psyker crashed to the ground, delicate strings of lightning still crawling over his plate. Vorias gasped for breath, struggling to push himself to his knees before sagging back to the deck.

'What happened?' Khârn rounded on the psyker. He looked back at Angron as the primarch's thrashing ceased. 'What did you do?'

'What did you *see*?' Gahlan said, his voice firm but calm as he crouched beside Vorias.

'He is dreaming,' Vorias croaked between pained breaths.

'Dreaming?' Khârn turned from Angron to glare at Vorias. 'Dreaming of what?'

Vorias looked up at his brothers, a single tear of blood sliding down his cheek. He opened his fist, and a small measure of fine white dust spilled onto the ground. 'Pain.'

*If he lived on Terra, growing into adulthood beneath humanity's native sun, they would have marked Angron as ten years old that day. Still a child, but already he is a match in size for the largest men who fight and die on the hot dust, and more than a match in strength.*

*From the very beginning, Angron stands apart from the rest. After receiving his name and winning the Devil's Tears, the crowds gasp in shock as they see what was once a boy grow progressively larger every time they see him fight. He is swifter than the other gladiators, his mind able to anticipate every action his opponents might take, and he wields any weapon with the skill of a master only moments after being given it.*

*The killing agonises him, at first. It had felt different the first time, out in the freezing snow, fighting for his life. Taking life then had purpose. It felt just. Here, on the red sands, there is no sense to the bloodshed. It brings*

*about no change, no resolutions, just carnage for the sake of carnage. Angron and his fellow gladiators bleed and die in agony to slake the thirst of the crowd, a thirst they all know will never be satisfied.*

*In time, it becomes easier for the boy to kill. Given no purpose other than as a slave to be used, Angron takes up the other warriors' outlook as his own, and finds ways to give meaning to his life as a gladiator. He alters his perceptions, hearing from the crowd not the jeering of his betters but adulation, even worship for his strength, and so he ceases to hate them. Only the maggot's eyes earn that.*

*The combat becomes a ritual dance, an almost religious experience where respect is owed to all and competing to spill each other's blood forges bonds stronger than any other. He throws everything he has into the fight, for to do any less would inflict grave dishonour upon his opponent. In death-matches, the act of killing the champion opposite you after a brutal, prolonged battle, seeing him off to oblivion after a worthy exchange, there is honour in that. Angron is able to give them as good a death as he can, before he is sent back to the caves in chains.*

*And in a secret, shameful place in the back of his mind, Angron envies the dead. They have nothing left to give. The high-riders, the maggot's eyes, the hot dust, they are all done with them.*

*They aren't always death-matches, though. For all their cruelty, the high-riders know well enough that they have to preserve their supply of gladiators to ensure there will be enough contests to keep the populace entertained. While festivals and sacred dates drench the arena in slave blood for days on end, most contests end in one side's capitulation, and the warriors will return to their caves to exchange twists in their triumph ropes with those who have beaten them.*

*Angron's own rope is red, as none of the others have come close to defeating him in battle. And though he gives black twists to his brothers and sisters, he does so with honour, not superiority. Through this they forge the bonds of camaraderie amongst them all that knit them into a family.*

*Angron is on the red sands again, standing together with a dozen of his kindred as they wait for the bloodshed to commence. In the past weeks they have fought machines, other men and great beasts, but all that is arrayed against them now is a woman of indeterminate age, shrinking from the light and clamour of the arena. She is unnaturally thin, clothed in torn sackcloth with a buzzing metal torque around her throat.*

*‘What is this?’ Angron asks. There is something to the girl, something* wrong *he feels in the core of his being but cannot explain. One of the gladiators shakes his head in a rattle of mail and plate scales.*

*‘I don’t–’*

*The air takes on a strange scent. Angron feels cold all of a sudden, watching the girl. The hot dust drops away from her. The red sand clumps and solidifies as frost trickles out from her feet. Ryn the spearman is closest to her when Tethys feels within the memory the telltales of a sense he knows all too well.*

*‘Witch!’ Ryn manages to scream, before his head snaps back. Ryn’s jaw wrenches wide, then still wider, the flesh and sinew tearing as the top half of his head hinges so far back he can stare at the ground behind himself. Blood fountains up from a ruptured throat, spilling out over Ryn as he shivers in agonised convulsions. He should have fallen by now, Angron thinks in horror. He should be dead.*

*The slender woman is holding Ryn upright with her thoughts. She reaches out with a clawed hand, fire weeping from her fingertips. She splays her fingers open, and Ryn explodes. Bits of bone scratch and cut into Angron’s bare flesh. All that remains of the spearman is a pool of blood on the sand, twisted and shaped into some unknowable symbol that births agony in Angron’s mind if he looks upon it.*

*Another gladiator begins screaming as his skin peels free from his flesh. The witch lifts him into the air, spinning him about in a shower of blood. The bones of his limbs shatter, crushing into powder as he is flailed. He is nothing more than a sack of bleeding meat by the time she lets him fall back to the ground.*

*The killing is hurting the witch. After she boils three fighters alive who try to rush her, she sinks to one knee, her frail body sheened in sweat, her eyes weeping blood. The torque around her neck makes a waspish sound and she cries out, surging back to her feet with purple fire licking from her fists.*

*The edges of the memory blur, distorted to Tethys’ sight by his father’s pain. By the time Angron is upon her he is the only one left. All of his brothers and sisters that had stood with him are gone, their deaths ugly and unspeakable. No glory ushered them into oblivion, no honour. Just fear, and pain and blackness as they were twisted until they burst by the witch’s black magic.*

*Angron can see the reluctance, the pain etched clear upon the witch’s face.*

*The cries she makes are tortured ones. The high-riders likely stole her from the wastes and delivered her here for sport like all the rest of them. She does not know Angron or any of the others to hate them and desire such cruelty and suffering in their deaths. Yet still she is goaded to kill, forced on by the collar scorching her neck. Angron's mind goes back three months, to when he had been forced to fight a huntsman and his leashed hounds, and kill them all with his bare hands.*

*He cannot feel sympathy. Not after what she has done. The only thing inside him now is hate, a burning hate that demands her unclean blood.*

*The frozen sand feels strange beneath his pounding feet as he raises his axe. Her eyes flash and the weapon turns to snowflakes in his hand. The sudden cold throws him off his stride, making his sprint a stumble.*

*Angron's mind catches fire, a match for the flames crisping his flesh. He presses on, pushing away pain that nearly drives Tethys to blindness, and seizes hold of the witch by her frail shoulders, and then her throat.*

*The flames roar hotter as Angron drags them both to the ground. He can smell his blood bake into smoke, and see his bones peeking through the charred meat of his arms. His bleeding fingers slip against the torque, which is cold to the touch, but he persists in throttling her.*

*At some point she stops struggling. The witch's flesh feels like ice and stone. Angron senses it within her, the power she could never control, and the misery it has wrought for every moment she has drawn breath.*

*A word, or the idea of a word, presses out from the flames behind Angron's eyes, forming out of the agony.*

Please.

*Angron screams as he breaks her head open against the frozen ground. The fire vanishes from his skull with a distorted cry the instant she dies, and he scrambles away from her corpse. Within moments it has crumbled into ash, like wood burning without fire, leaving only the buzzing torque behind in the sand.*

*Tethys can still feel the scraps of the witch's soul, twisting into the air like paper in a draft as one by one they are dragged into the warp beyond reality and greedily consumed. He looks within his father, seeing a new scar laid bare upon Angron's mind. One that nothing has been able to heal, and never will.*

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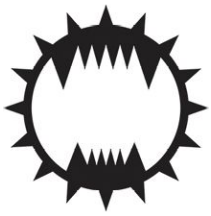

# FOURTEEN

In a contemplative silence, Mago walked the depths of the *Con-queror*. He found the warship still in upheaval after the events in the Triumphal Hall, dealing with the aftershocks of Angron's rampage and subsequent collapse. Khârn had locked their father away in his darkened hall, admitting only Gahlan Surlak, Vel-Kheredar and a select few of their Apothecary and Mechanicum adept cohorts. Other than leaving to duel Mago on the *Hound's Tooth*, the primarch's equerry had never left his side. None knew with any certainty when or in what state the primarch would rise from his psychically induced coma, nor what he would do when he did.

Arriving by shuttle craft, Mago had not announced his arrival on the World Eaters flagship, not even to Khârn. While there was no law barring any member of the Legion from coming or going between any of the ships in the fleet as they pleased, the purpose of the centurion's visit was one he had preferred to keep discreet.

Moving in solitude, an hour passed as Mago walked through wide

crowded thoroughfares and claustrophobic passages. The rumbling of the battleship's core slipped into the background, replaced by the pounding of forge hammers. He saw fewer and fewer souls the further down he went, down into the deep, cold corners of the *Conqueror*, where the legends of the Legion's past rested.

He came to a halt before the great iron gateway, submitting to the programmed suspicion of the maniple of combat servitors that guarded the entrance. The hulking praetorians played beams of crimson light over Mago, their heavy back-mounted cannons whirring with menace until the centurion's identity was validated and they clanked aside to let him pass.

The sounds of the flagship were low, distant things in the shadowed expanse of the chamber. Great machines filled it, cold and still in deactivation. The walls were ringed with platforms upon which they slumbered, great iron plinths that held the dark, hulking shapes of the Legion's deathless heroes.

Robed adepts appeared from the shadows to stand before Mago. The centurion spoke to them, telling them what he would have them do, and they glided away from him without a word. The robed figures gathered around the central platform, burbling in binaric cant as they roused the banks of machinery surrounding it into life.

The temperature rose as the machines activated, blurring the air with steam and heat haze. Gears ground and cogitators chattered. Hazy lumens blinked on over the platform, bathing Mago in wan light. He waited while the tech-priests worked, moving in unison as they executed the needed rituals and chanted the Rites of Awakening.

'Is it done?' Mago asked. The nearest of the adepts nodded his cowled head.

'Then leave us, and disable anything recording this space until I depart.'

The robed half-men filed out of the chamber, leaving Mago standing alone before an iron-wrought god of war. Scarlet eye-lenses flickered then blazed to life as power reached every part of the Contemptor-pattern Dreadnought. The walker's sensor cluster, formed in the shape of a Space Marine's helm, panned down with a grind of servos to glare at the captain of the Unbroken.

'Who said,' the machine rumbled, 'that you could wear my cloak?'

Nagrakali sounded all the more brutal when it was rendered through the snarling helm of a towering war construct. Beneath the thrum of machinery and the itch of a vocabulator, Mago could still hear the lingering trace of a

voice that had never failed to stir his blood. Despite everything, he found himself smiling. ‘Gheer did.’

‘Gheer…’ The Contemptor breathed the name of the slain Legion Master. ‘A clumsy strategist, but handy enough with an axe in his hands.’ The bullet-head of the Dreadnought panned in a squeal of motorised joints, glaring down at Mago. ‘It suits you.’

‘Thank you, lord,’ said the centurion. ‘You and I must talk.’

‘So,’ boomed the Dreadnought, ‘it is you who leads the Unbroken now.’

Lhorke took his first ponderous step from the restraint platform, sending a tremor rattling across the deck. ‘You were a sergeant when last I saw you, still struggling to learn which end of the axe to hold,’ said Lhorke as his ironform slowly paced the chamber. ‘Each time they wake me, I recognise less and less. It is the fashion of things, I suppose, to change. Especially now.’

‘That is why I am here, lord,’ said Mago. ‘It is about Angron.’

The centurion recounted the sequence of events that had occurred since the War Hound had last been roused from stasis. He explained their past campaigns, the fighting below on Ghenna and the continued deterioration of the primarch, ending with what had happened in the Triumphal Hall. Lhorke took it all in, silent but for the rumble of a Contemptor’s powerplant.

Lhorke had fallen three decades before Nuceria, fighting the battle that broke the back of a greenskin empire that had enslaved seven star systems. In a history spoiled with exemplary leadership, Lhorke had been a Legion Master without peer, a tactical genius who was always the first to enter battle and the last to leave it. He had been a true warrior-king, one who never failed to inspire his brothers and spur them on towards victory.

Dug out from a mountain of greenskin dead, including the broken corpse of their foul warboss, Lhorke had life enough to be interred within his ironform. His became a waking death within its unfeeling confines, and even as the XII was transformed, the iconography of the old War Hounds was never scoured from his sarcophagus. The Legion gave him the honorific of the First, the alpha of the Legion’s growing contingent of walking dead.

Mago could not help himself from considering how differently events might have played out, if he had not fallen that day. If it had been Lhorke,

and not Gheer, who had stood before Angron after Desh'ea. Would the fate facing the Legion be the same?

'And you intend to do,' asked the First after Mago had finished, 'what?'

'The future of the Legion stands upon a precipice,' said Mago. 'If this happens, if we all take the Nails, then there will be no turning back from that path, a path that leads us into the unknown.'

Lhorke stopped. 'You know exactly where it will lead. Angron.'

'He is the primarch.' Mago cast his eyes to the deck. 'I venerate him, I idolise him above any other soul, but he is taking us to a place that we cannot go. I cannot reconcile his plans for us with the awe his mere presence instils in me. History will look back upon this point as the moment where we chose what our destiny would be.'

'Those who write our histories never record events as they truly happened,' said Lhorke. 'They only record what they want you to see. Consider what you are saying. Angron is not Guilliman, or Vulkan. He does not welcome debate or tolerate challenge. And yet you would defy him openly, about that facet of himself that has informed his every thought and deed since those implants were hammered into him?'

'I cannot see them as anything but poison,' said Mago. 'I cannot accept that mutilating the Legion with them is right.'

'I am not speaking of righteousness.' Lhorke tensed his massive fists. 'I am talking about being the first Legion to rebel against its patriarch. I am talking about the oceans of blood that would come from such a thing, surely as a sun rises. Twice before the Emperor has purged His own progeny, and every living soul within the Legions that followed them. Do not believe for a single moment that the Eaters of Worlds are above such scrutiny.'

'Then what would you have us do?' asked Mago. 'If defying Angron brings down the Emperor's wrath, how then would He respond to a whole Legion implanted with the Nails?'

Lhorke did not answer right away. He looked down at his clawed iron fists. 'I cannot presume to know His mind. All I can do is remember Him on Terra, before the Unification. The lengths He went to, and what He willed us to do for Him to achieve unification. So long as the galaxy is delivered under His control, as long as that end is achieved and His ambition accomplished, I do not truly know if the Master of Mankind would concern himself with the means by which it was done.'

'Do you think…' Mago whispered. 'Do you think that it might be better,

after the Nails? Simpler. All this doubt, this torn feeling, do you think they can take it away?'

'They may,' answered Lhorke. 'But the question you must ask yourself is, if they do, what then will be left to take its place?'

Neither of them spoke, letting the question hang upon the air.

'I think…' Lhorke stopped, pivoting away from his restraint platform, 'I will stay awake a little longer. I would bear witness to how this unfolds.'

Mago dipped his head. 'Of course.'

'Speak with our brothers, Mago,' said Lhorke. 'Find where they stand in their hearts, for if you decide to follow this course, you will need allies, and many.'

The centurion nodded. 'And can I count you among them, lord?'

'Only if you cease calling me that,' Lhorke grumbled. The First rotated his mechanical arms in an uncanny likeness of a man trying to shake the weariness from his limbs. A low gear-slip growl issued from Lhorke's sarcophagus. 'Damn this cold.'

'Can anything be done to ease the pain?' asked Mago.

'Pain.' Lhorke considered the word. 'Pain, little brother, is all that I have left.'

Gahlan Surlak entered his laboratory deep within the heart of the *Conqueror*. The bulkhead rumbled shut behind him and locked with a rumbling clunk of magnetic fusion. His sanctuary stretched out before him, an immense room built from half a dozen smaller ones that were designed to store the vast amount of supplies needed to keep a Gloriana-class battleship operational. He had requisitioned the series of chambers himself, tearing down the partitioning walls and replacing the pallets of industrial cargo with a dizzying array of medical and technical equipment that rivalled any amongst the eighteen Legions.

Banks of chattering cogitators shared space with amniotic fluid caskets and specimen jars. Red-robed adepts of the Mechanicum worked alongside medicae thralls while Legion Apothecaries combined their efforts with their crimson-armoured Techmarine brothers. Calculations were scrawled across the walls and spilled over blueprints and technical schematics, almost all of them marred by lines of thick red ink.

Surlak drew in a breath of the laboratory's icy air. Here, he strove to forge a union of the Apothecary's art and the secrets of sacred Mars. It was only

through such a union that the achievement of his life's work could be made possible: the fulfilment of his father's mandate to forge a functioning, stable replica of the Butcher's Nails.

Dead World Eaters, freshly delivered from the debacle on Ghenna, occupied steel slabs, their skulls sawn open to expose the grey matter of their brains. Gahlan had seen to them personally, removing their progenoid glands to be implanted within fresh recruits and caring for their bodies with all of the reverence expected of a brother. In death, his fallen kin would continue to serve the Legion. On them, the fulcrum of the XII's future would turn.

Vel-Kheredar moved between teams of genetors, augmetists and neuralogists, his long stalk legs clicking against the deck. The magos held the reins for the Mechanicum's contributions to producing prototypes of the neural implants, where Surlak's focus was on guiding the symbiosis built between their technology and XII Legion flesh. If one could consider the tech-priest to be the heart of their efforts, then the Apothecary was the soul.

Rare was the occasion when the representatives of Mars would openly share their secrets and methodologies with any outside their order. However, Gahlan Surlak had succeeded in luring Vel-Kheredar into their alliance by knowing that above all, the challenge of gaining knowledge and overcoming the impossible was something the Martian could not resist. The archeotech that the primarch's aggression implants were drawn from fascinated Vel-Kheredar, and that fascination only grew with each failed attempt to successfully replicate the Butcher's Nails. He would not cease in his labours until he did.

Surlak walked past the magos without a word. He had learned through sharing the space with the Martians that Vel-Kheredar considered the entire concept of greetings superfluous. They were aware that the other was present, and so the time spent in exchanging words to form such a redundancy was viewed as an inappropriate expenditure of time. If either of them required the knowledge or expertise of the other, then they would expend the effort to speak.

On the last of the slabs, dissected to the point where its component parts covered the entirety of the surface, was the corpse of the Ghennan simulacrum that Khârn had brought before Angron. On Gahlan's orders, several more of the humanoid proxies had been collected from the surface to be dissected and studied alongside it. Specialised servitors surrounded

the uncanny, smiling things, scanning and documenting every component of them to be fed into the laboratory's immense central cogitators for extensive analysis, under the watchful eye of Legion and Mechanicum contingent overseers.

'Apothecary.' One of Gahlan's white-armoured kindred approached. He held out a rolled vellum scroll, still warm from the servitor that had inscribed it. 'I have collated and summarised our most recent findings.'

'My thanks, Bhir.' Surlak's eyes flicked as he rapidly digested the information, a single thin eyebrow rising in an arch upon his face. He looked up from the scroll. 'You are certain these findings are accurate?'

Bhir nodded. 'We repeated the testing procedure you outlined in your protocols to your exact specifications, then re-processed the final computations ninety-six times to confirm their veracity. Each conclusion was the same.'

Gahlan looked back to the scroll, reading its contents again as the rest of the laboratory shrank from his notice.

'The link we found,' Bhir ventured to Gahlan. 'What does it mean?'

'I don't know yet – something,' answered Surlak as he looked down at the spread of cut-apart faces looking up at him. 'Perhaps everything.'

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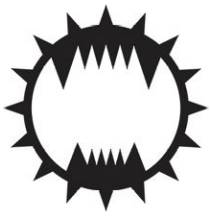

# FIFTEEN

The sounds of the *Conqueror* returned to their full roaring ambiance as Mago ascended to the flagship's more populous decks. His meeting with Lhorke had not gone as he had thought it would, leaving the World Eater with more questions than answers. What right did a Legion truly have to oppose the will of its primarch? What would the Emperor see, or the other Legions? And was there even purpose to such an opposition? What could be gained from resisting Angron over the Nails, when they might never be able to be replicated?

'Hail, the Unbroken centurion!'

Mago started, jarred from his introspection at the centre of one of the *Conqueror*'s bustling thoroughfares that led to the ancillary docking bays. He did not see a face at first as the speaker pushed his way through the crowd, but the tang of counterseptic on the air was all the hint he needed.

'Apothecary Surlak,' said Mago, keeping his tone neutral to mask his distaste. Of all his brothers, none embodied the obsession to have the

Legion follow their primarch into madness more than the one approaching him. ‘Well met.’

Gahlan Surlak emerged from the mortal crew and servitors parting from his path. He grinned as he stood before Mago. ‘I did not know that you had come back aboard the flagship.’

‘Conferring with some of the other captains,’ Mago replied. ‘Taking stock of our present situation and readying contingencies to be put into place. How fares the primarch? Has his condition changed since?’

‘Since your Lexicanum cast him into a psionic coma?’ Gahlan chuckled. ‘Yes, about that.’ He gestured for Mago to walk with him. ‘Come, brother. There is something I think you would like to see.’

‘I have seen more than enough of these creatures,’ Mago growled as he looked down at the surgical slab and the dissected Ghennan upon it. ‘Both dead and alive.’

‘I’m sure you have,’ smiled Gahlan Surlak. The air was cold within his laboratory. Already the place had darkened the mood of the 18th captain, seeing World Eaters he had fought alongside and watched die in battle cut open and pulled apart by servitors, as though they were mere specimens and not honoured Legion kin.

‘But that is not why I asked you here.’

Mago’s attention returned to Gahlan and the Ghennan on the slab. The false man’s skull was riddled with wires, connecting it to a bank of cogitators set into the far wall.

‘When Khârn first brought me this,’ Gahlan gestured to the Ghennan, ‘I believed it to be purely mechanical. So, like any other piece of salvaged technology, we sought to study its function, under controlled conditions of course. We ran an electrical current through it, trying to restore power to selective areas, and once we did we discovered that we had interrupted something. A signal, partly psionic in nature, partly mundane.’

‘Thinking machines,’ said Mago with disgust. In spite of the inhuman nature of the Martian tech-priests, all the disparate strands of man were singularly opposed to any resurgence of the abominable intelligences that had wreaked untold suffering in bygone darker ages.

‘These things are machines, that is true. But the will that guides them is not. We have determined, through our study of the signal it was broadcasting as well as their anatomy, that the Ghennans are not merely

autonomous machines masquerading as humanity. This entity, its thoughts, its movements, all were being controlled remotely, by a human mind. It is possible that a single mind can control hundreds, even thousands – if the command is not complicated.'

'A command such as standing in a crowd, between us and their cities,' said Mago.

'Precisely.' Gahlan nodded with a smile. 'The entire population, the true population, could be no more than a few thousand souls, and yet they control millions. It is truly extraordinary.'

Mago's mind returned to the crystal dome where he had met Ohna. The honeyed words of the Ghennans flickered through his memory, spoken in that bizarre, shared chorus.

'Disgusting.'

Gahlan snorted, a dry laugh that accompanied the slow shaking of his head. 'Are we really so different, in your mind? Both drawn from base humanity and elevated into something more, we by the Emperor's genius and they by their civilisation's technology. Both are incredible efforts of science and will, yet only one has won your scorn, captain? Do you think yourself an abomination as well?'

Mago was in no mood to indulge the Apothecary's baiting. 'And what difference does any of this make?' he asked, folding his arms across his chest. 'This changes nothing.'

'In regard to this compliance, yes,' admitted Surlak. 'However, for our efforts to create a working reproduction of the Nails, it is revolutionary.'

A chill shot through Mago at the words. 'Explain.'

'The largest obstacle we face is not creating the machinery of the implants,' said Gahlan. 'Such technology is little different to that utilised in the creation of any other graft or augmentation. Where we stumbled, and where the lack of templates for this archeotech was felt most acutely, was in the manner in which the implants interface with a living brain. There once existed such standard template constructs for devices such as these, but they have been lost to us since Old Night – most, it is feared, forever.'

Gahlan glanced at Mago. 'While the primarch's fall was a disastrous event that has thrown the Legion into upheaval at the moment, it has also given me unprecedented access to his Butcher's Nails, to study them and the enhancements they provide to our lord.'

Mago stiffened at his brother's choice of words, calling the affliction

wrought by the cursed implants *enhancements*, but held his tongue.

‘Seized by some small epiphany, I compared the data we had gathered from the Ghennan and Angron, and found that in more than one sense, they overlap. We believe that the technology employed by the Ghennans is based on the same standard template construct lineage as the primarch’s enhancements, and as such, by utilising their design, we can finally recreate the Nails in a fashion that allows for a stable survivable outcome – and subsequently mass implantation across the Legion.’

‘You are going to use this,’ said Mago slowly, glaring down at the butchered android, ‘use these things, to make a replicant of the Nails.’

‘A stable replicant.’ Gahlan nodded, accepting a data-slate from a menial and glancing over it quickly. ‘Yes.’

A thousand thoughts ran screaming through Mago’s head. It had finally happened. Gahlan had unlocked the means to recreate the Nails, and damn the entire XII Legion.

‘You can’t fix him,’ said Mago bitterly. ‘Can you? The primarch. Otherwise you would have by now. All your efforts to remove those accursed implants, to keep them from driving him mad, from killing him, all met with failure.’

‘The implants cannot be removed,’ said Gahlan calmly. ‘Not without killing him.’

‘You failed,’ Mago continued, ‘and thus your only recourse is to infect the Legion with the same madness as our father.’

Gahlan set the slate down carefully, returning his full attention to Mago. ‘If you mean obeying the commands of our gene-sire, the father cast into being by the Emperor Himself and who, by His will, controls the fate of this Legion, then yes.’

Surlak took a step closer to Mago, their feathered breath mingling in the chill air. ‘This is a war and we are soldiers. Soldiers obey the commands that are given to them, no matter what they may be. Even those among us who reject that label, who call us “warriors” from some misguided sense of martial hubris, are even more beholden to the will of their king. Our king. I did my duty. We do as he says, Mago. We take what he gives to us, and he has given us the Nails.’

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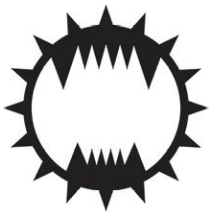

# SIXTEEN

*Angron awakes with a start from a nightmare about smothering. He feels as though his head is nodding, even though it is still. A snarl rises in his throat as he recognises the telltale aftereffects of the high-riders' narcotic tranquilisers. As his body grows larger by the day, his gaolers have needed to pump increasingly higher amounts of the dangerous drugs into his blood to make him sleep, holding back only when they were just short of stopping his heart.*

*Dull thunder reverberates around him in a rhythmic throb. He wants to stretch and shake the lingering heaviness out of his limbs, but there is no room. A nauseating stench fills the hot, wet air. His eyes are open, and yet he can barely see anything outside of a quivering, reddish murk. It is then that he realises the walls are moving in time with the pounding thunder.*

*It is a heartbeat. Angron is inside something.*

*'Angron.' He hears a weak voice coming from below him, and a shaking hand takes desperate hold of his ankle. He recognises the voice from the*

*caves where they live between fights.*

*‘Hexx.’ Angron strains, pushing against the slick, shivering walls around him. All he can see is the head and shoulders of the other gladiator beneath him.*

*‘An ynntg worm,’ says Hexx. ‘They’ve put us in a damn ynntg worm.’*

*Angron has heard of this before. The Desh’eans love to incapacitate slaves and feed them whole to one of Nuceria’s colossal sea worms. Awakening trapped inside the creature, they will have mere minutes to cut themselves free before they suffocate, all while the high-riders laugh and drink and wager upon the outcome.*

*They have no weapons, and an ynntg worm’s hide is as rigid as stone. A frustrated cry bellows from Angron’s lips as his fingers scratch at the stomach lining encasing them, trying to find any weakened spot or leverage to exploit. The conditions inside grow steadily hotter by the moment, and the air thinner. Angron ceases to breathe, holding his breath as long as he can to save oxygen for Hexx.*

*He cannot find anything to grab onto, no old scar to tear open and no ulcer to hook his fingers into. Angron looks down. Hexx is struggling to remain conscious. Only one option remains for them. They must try to climb.*

*‘Take hold of me,’ says Angron. He reaches down and pulls Hexx’s arms around his waist. ‘Hold onto me, Hexx.’*

*Hexx clasps his hands together, using his strength to stay linked to Angron as the youth tries to effect their escape. Angron squirms, grunting with exertion as he swims his way up the creature’s digestive tract. The worm’s stomach acid covers him, but he puts the white-hot pain of his burning flesh from his mind. He focuses every bit of his will on wriggling higher, an inch at a time.*

*Several times, Angron feels Hexx’s grip slacken, threatening to break, before the man clutches tightly around him again. The instinct to survive is granting the gladiator new strength, but even this will be exhausted before long.*

*There is the dimmest bit of light ahead, a slender line of brighter red that marks the gap between the worm’s mandible jaws. The hope of escape fires his muscles with new strength, enough to keep him from sagging back down into the darkness.*

*Angron’s heartbeat pounds in his ears, so loudly that it nearly drowns out*

*that of the leviathan that has devoured them. He wills himself on, slipping and grasping for purchase, refusing to give credence to the searing pain of his flesh. Just a little further until freedom. Just a little more.*

*Light pours in through the tearing flesh and spraying ichor as he wrenches the beast's jaws apart. The worm resists as the bones in its mandibles crack, clamping down against Angron's fingers and bending them back until they dislocate. But Angron will not be denied, and the crowd roars as its favourite gladiator emerges from the worm's howling maw. He takes in a gulping lungful of air, falling forward onto the sand like a castaway washing up upon dry land. He reaches back, hauling Hexx out from the worm that is still rolling and twitching in its death throes.*

*Angron rolls Hexx onto his back, but the other warrior does not stir. His hands go to Hexx's throat but there is no pulse against his fingers. Angron peels the mucus and digestive acid away from his brother-fighter's lips, clearing the airway as he presses Hexx's chest to force his heart to resume pumping blood.*

*'Oooh!' The maggot's eyes descend around them. 'Angron-Thal'kr is trying to resuscitate the vaunted Hexx. Can he do it? Will he prevail and drag him from the jaws of death itself? Speak with your coin, friends! New odds are made – what will you wager?'*

*The youth refuses to listen to the sadistic banter of the high-riders, or the baying of the bloodthirsty crowd. He continues his fight to keep Hexx alive, stimulating his heart and breathing to drive the knife-fighter's body to take the labour back up itself. Cold trickles up Angron's backbone as the life flees from his brother's flesh. The colour drains from Hexx's face, his lips speckling with the pale blue of the newly dead.*

*Angron sinks back on his haunches in the hot dust, the grit coagulating with the blood and mucus slathering him into a rubbery greyish-pink film. He reaches for Hexx, pawing away enough of the filth covering the corpse's face so that he can close his eyes.*

*'Failure!' chirp the high-riders to a mixture of cheers and abuse from the arena. 'Angron has failed to drag Hexx from the shores of death. His knives shall taste no more blood for you, dear friends. Winners collect, losers pay your debts!'*

*'I couldn't save him,' says Angron. One by one he snaps his fingers back into their joints. He looks up at Oenomaus as the old pit fighter tears his*

*ragged tunic to dress the youth's wounds. 'Hexx, I couldn't save him.'*

*'They didn't want you to save him,' Oenomaus replies. 'That isn't what our lives are to the high-riders. The only thing they want from us is something for them to laugh at when we fight and something to cheer over when we die. That is all we will ever be to them.'*

*Angron stops his mentor from binding a weeping burn across his chest. Wounds that deep always somehow vanish come morning, healing over into smooth stripes, even though they are severe enough to kill any other man. Angron has inflicted enough of them himself to know.*

*A whimper draws Angron's attention. He peers across the dimness of their cave, seeing a young boy shudder upon the ground, the slaver brand still raw and pink on his flesh.*

*'Jochura,' says Oenomaus. 'The boy tasted his first of the hot dust yesterday, barely made it out. And so like the rest of us he struggles now. He cannot escape the red sands, not even in his dreams.'*

*Angron rises, stepping over the forms of sleeping slaves as he makes his way over to Jochura. He looks down at the youth, shivering in a foetal huddle, his brow glittering with his nightmare's panic sweat.*

*'Leave him be,' says Oenomaus, appearing at Angron's side. 'He will have to grow accustomed to the torment, if he wishes to keep company among the living.'*

*Sinking slowly to his knees, Angron places a hand on Jochura's shoulder, the movement quieter and softer than one would think possible for a man of his size. He closes his eyes, and Tethys feels the boy's pain as though it is his own: heat, knifing blades, screams and the splash of hot blood in his eyes. Angron winces for a moment, and the boy goes still, his cries silenced as they are replaced by deep, dreamless sleep.*

*Oenomaus stares at Angron as the gladiator pulls his hand away. 'What…' The old man looks between the becalmed Jochura and Angron. 'What did you do?'*

*'I don't know.' Angron shakes his head. Within the memory, awe overcomes Tethys at what he has just witnessed.*

*'What is the first thing you remember, Angron?' asks Oenomaus. 'The very first thing?'*

*'Cold,' Angron replies.*

*'The mountain?'*

*Angron frowns. 'No, different from the mountain. This was an unnatural*

*cold. Metal, not stone. There were voices, then light, then…' He grips his head. 'I can't remember.'*

*'You aren't meant for this place,' says Oenomaus. 'Wherever you came from, whatever it is that you are destined for, you will not find it within these walls. And one day, these caves and these chains will not be able to hold us, and you will be free to find your destiny.'*

*'My destiny is beside you, Oenomaus,' says Angron. 'With my brothers and sisters, living free of the hot dust.'*

*The grizzled fighter smiles. 'Then free of the hot dust we shall be.'*

*Other slaves have witnessed what Angron did for Jochura. They shuffle forth towards him, fear and suspicion mixing with a kind of reverence, a desire to be similarly blessed. Angron sees something strange in their eyes, something that he has never seen before: hope.*

*They sleep in a great unbroken chain that night, each laying a hand on the other, ending with Angron. Tethys feels lifetimes of abuse and torment wrack his father as he takes the pain of his brothers and sisters into himself.*

*Tethys can feel the will of his young father harden into steel, staring up at his masters above, weeping tears of blood. He knows that a reckoning is coming, that soon he will leave this cave and tear the high-riders down from their gilded thrones. That he will give his brothers and sisters their liberty, even if he has to spill an ocean of blood to do so.*

*Tonight he gives them all that he has the power to give. If only for a short time, he grants them a reprieve from the torture that consumes their lives. Morning will come, and bring the hot dust, but until then, Angron suffers so that he might give his family some measure of peace.*

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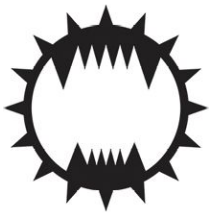

# SEVENTEEN

One by one, they came aboard the *Hound's Tooth*. They arrived by shuttle, or gunship, some even in the booming flare of tele-portation. Most of them wore simple robes, unmarked and with heavy cowls raised to mask their faces. A few came in their full panoply as they met to swear oaths and do their duty.

The duty of saving the XII Legion.

Centurions, captains and sub-commanders from nearly one-third of the World Eaters companies present above Ghenna had come in answer to Mago's summons. The commander of the Unbroken had only contacted those whose loyalty he could be sure of, warriors born of Terra whose first tongue was Gothic and not Nagrakali, who had once marched to battle as War Hounds. Brothers whose minds had not been seduced by the promise of the Butcher's Nails.

Like the allied chieftains of a war council of ancient times, they assembled in an isolated corner of Mago's ship, where the leader of the Unbroken

waited with Astakos and Hanno at his side. Mago had sent Orontes to the *Conqueror* to oversee resupply to the *Hound's Tooth*. It grieved him, but Mago knew his brother's heart. He could not trust him to join this council, or even to know of its existence.

'I have gathered us all here,' Mago began once the last of the commanders arrived, 'for a purpose. There is no rank here – each of the voices in this room carries equal weight. No ear that is not present now will hear of what is said.'

Mago studied the World Eaters filling the chamber. 'I will not waste time. Ever since the day of our primarch's discovery, our Legion has been poised over a precipice. Angron has long demanded that each and every one of us submit to the Butcher's Nails, the same implants that torture and madden him in his every waking moment. He has set no limit on the resources expended to replicate them, and each of us knew that the day would come when the means to do so would be achieved. That day has come.'

Murmurs rippled through the assembled commanders. Warriors exchanged glances, tense and incredulous.

'And you know of this how?' demanded Kauragar, captain of the 21st Company.

Mago gave a nod to his fellow centurion, and gestured to a member of the crowd. 'I present Brother Bhir, of the apothecarion.'

The white-armoured Apothecary stepped from the onlookers to stand at Mago's side. 'I have seen it with my own eyes,' said Bhir. 'Gahlan Surlak has found the key within the things we fought on Ninety-Three Fifteen. He has reverse-engineered the tech-nology of the Ghennan simulacrums and found a link to the primarch's implants by an ancient standard template construct archeotech. He will use that to recreate the Butcher's Nails in a fashion that can be safely implanted across the entire Legion.'

'What Bhir has said is true. I have seen it with my own eyes and I have heard it from Gahlan's own lips,' said Mago. 'This I swear.'

For years, the Butcher's Nails had been a threat looming on the horizon, but remaining on the horizon. Now that threat was upon them, and this new reality sowed discord amongst the World Eaters in a din of conflicting voices.

'If we refuse the Nails, all of us united, what can Lord Angron do?' one centurion asked.

'This cannot be allowed to pass,' said another. 'Surlak must be stopped.'

‘No matter the cost,’ said another. ‘If we must empty the *Conqueror* and starve its heart to make that ship Angron’s prison out in the void, then we must do so.’

‘Who are you to decide such a thing?’ demanded Ghoss of the 85th. ‘The Emperor brought Angron into being by His own hands. Suddenly you know better than our gene-sire?’

‘It is not any one mind who will decide,’ said Mago, holding out his arms to demand quiet. ‘It is all of us. We must decide now, while we still can, what we will do about this.’

Mago felt every eye upon him, and continued. ‘If you seek the contents of my thoughts, I will tell you now. The Legion cannot accept the Butcher’s Nails. The primarch’s demands, the countdowns, the killing of our own. That all ends, now. Gahlan’s experiments cannot be allowed to bear fruit, and Angron must face the Emperor, for if any soul in this life can cure our lord of the Nails, it is He. I have spoken of this with Lhorke – he will stand with us.’

‘You went aboard the *Conqueror* and woke the First without their notice?’ asked Ghoss. ‘Where is he now? Why is he not here with us?’

‘His presence would draw too much attention,’ Mago replied. ‘A third of the present Legion’s command is risk enough. Having the First here, moving him from the *Conqueror*, would draw eyes we do not want watching.’

‘What about Khârn?’ Kauragar finally asked.

‘Khârn is our brother,’ said Mago. ‘He is the greatest of us. If we can help him to see the truth, the knife being held to our Legion’s throat, he will stand against the Nails the same as we do.’

‘You are speaking of insurrection,’ said Ghoss. ‘Conspiring here to overthrow our own primarch. Even if such a thing were possible, even if we win, what do you really think is going to happen? That the Emperor will stand idly by when we bring Angron before Him without taking action?’

‘The Emperor created Angron,’ said Bhir. ‘He cannot be blind to his affliction. He has to understand what we are being forced to do. He could even help us, if we can take a ship–’

‘No.’ Mago shook his head firmly. ‘Angron is our primarch, and this is our Legion. This is no one else’s duty but ours. We will not have the Emperor and his Custodes come and do our duty for us. We will bring him before the Emperor, but we must do it ourselves.’

‘And if the Emperor does not think as you believe He does? If He looks down upon all of this and deems that, mad or not, a Legion cannot be allowed to turn against its primarch?’

‘Then I will stand in the face of His judgement,’ said Mago. ‘And I will accept oblivion as a loyal son, with his eyes open and mind unbroken.’

‘I was born on the Throneworld,’ said Astakos, speaking for the first time since the council began. ‘The same as everyone here, I travelled its surface beneath His banner, fighting in His name since the day I could walk. We killed anyone He commanded, even those He used to lead. We overthrew tyrants, the mad and the corrupt, because such things had no place in the Imperium He was building. We are all bonded in a shared dream of the future. If we cannot abide the future Angron is creating for us, then it is we who must chart the Legion’s path.’

The standard bearer’s words alloyed the assembled World Eaters. Centurions nodded and gave short bows of their heads to his words.

‘It is decided, then,’ said Mago. ‘We will act, to save the Legion.’

‘How?’ asked Ghoss.

‘First, the prototype Gahlan has created,’ said Mago. ‘It must be destroyed, and all knowledge of its creation with it.’

‘I’ll do it.’ Hanno stepped forward, his normally gregarious expression hard. ‘Tell me what to break to end all of this, and I will break it.’

‘Gahlan must be stopped, and his work destroyed,’ said Mago. He looked out across his brothers. ‘Those that would stand against us are blind, blinded by the power of the primarch and his favour. But they are still our brothers, and we do this just as much for them as for any other. What we do now must be done with as little blood as possible. Kinblood has already stained our hands for far too long.’

Fists thudded against chests. World Eaters swore oaths to one another, to stand together against a future where the Butcher’s Nails controlled their brothers. Pride swelled in Mago’s chest. The road ahead would be dark, and bitter, but he would do anything to preserve the Legion.

‘Angron still sleeps,’ said Mago. He glanced at Bhir, and the Apothecary gave him a nod to confirm it.

‘By the time our primarch awakens,’ Mago declared, ‘he will be on Terra with the Emperor, to receive His care in mending his broken mind. And before the Legion is ever told of Gahlan’s grand design, the Butcher’s Nails and the knowledge to recreate them will be ashes.’

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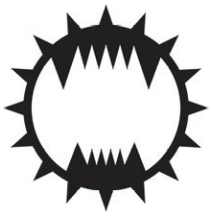

# EIGHTEEN

*Tethys sees the arena, the hot dust, once more through Angron's eyes. Again the pits, again the roars of the crowd, again the taste of blood coating his tongue so thickly he can taste nothing else.*

*Oenomaus stands with Angron in the memory, the gladiators fighting back to back against a horde of mutated beastmen. The twisted creatures bray curses and insults from goat-like heads, and stamp cloven hooves into the red sands in place of feet. Of the two dozen gladiators that had come from the caves to fight, only Angron and his mentor remain.*

*The vision wavers before Tethys' perception. Time stretches, showing the throat of a howling wretch parting before Angron's axe in horrifically slow motion, before leaping forward. The beastmen lie dead, while Angron and Oenomaus, though battered and bleeding, stand triumphant.*

*'Fear not, my people!' The maggot's eyes appear, buzzing through the battlefield of the hot dust to encircle the gladiators. 'This is not the end of today's contests. Angron the Unbeaten, and Oenomaus, the Bear of Ull-*

*Chaim have survived the perilous and hideous beasts of the southern jungles. They, and you my friends, deserve something remarkable. A special attraction for your viewing and wagering pleasure, that you will not soon forget.'*

*The wide doors of the arena are hauled open, and a pair of battered iron cubes are shoved onto the red sands by a team of chained slaves. Angron strains to listen over the din of the crowd, hearing sharp breathing and deep-throated growls issuing from each of the cells.*

*'More beasts?' asks Angron.*

*'No,' replies Oenomaus, his eyes not leaving the cells. 'Something much worse.'*

*'Ladies and gentlemen, commoners and high folk.' The voices of the maggot's eyes spike in volume as the doors to the cells open and the slave gangs flee in terror. 'I present to you Yrkonis and Turigidon, of the Cadere.'*

*The crowd explodes in cheers. The stands appear to undulate before Angron's eyes as men and women leap up and down in anticipation. The arena doors shut, and Angron watches as a pair of immense, hulking figures emerge from the darkness of their cells.*

*Each of the gladiators is an abhuman giant, equal to Angron in size. They are clad in mismatched armour of thick black iron, studded with spikes hung with tanned human skin and dangling chains ending in bleached skulls. One carries a pair of enormous powered axes, one in each fist, while the other is armed with a spiked globe bound to his left arm by a length of dense heavy chain.*

*They wear the* remissum*, a pair of bladed iron horns, upon their helmets. It is this mark, more than any other, that conveys to Angron that these warriors have walked the berserker's path for too long, and can no longer see anything but blood. Those who wear the remissum are too violent, too unstable, to live amongst the other slaves for fear of turning the caves into an abattoir. Outside the arena, such warriors are chained into dark cells, with no one in reach to slake their bloodlust.*

*Within the arena, they always find ample blood to spill. They only compete in death-matches.*

*Angron can see the steel cabling hanging down the backs of their heads beneath their helms, the metallic dreadlocks of the aggression amplifiers known as the Butcher's Nails. The implants are said to scour the mind of any emotion save rage, and torture a warrior's every thought save for the*

*desire to kill.*

*Angron counts the skulls hanging from their battered armour. 'The Cadere,' he says to Oenomaus. 'You told me two of them once slew a hundred gladiators by themselves, that their bodies were stacked so high the pair nearly clawed themselves out of the hot dust.'*

*'They are terrifying,' his mentor nods, 'those who have been forced to take the Nails. A warrior who wants to live has no defence against one who doesn't care if he dies.' He leans in. 'And Angron, every warrior wants to live.'*

*The old fighter takes a step towards the Cadere, and clashes the blade of his sword against his shield. 'I wish you fortune in the battle to come, and peace in the oblivion beyond.'*

*No words come from the lips of the Cadere. The horned berserkers twitch and shudder from the implants needling their minds. With a roar that shocks the crowd for a moment into silence, they charge.*

*The memory of the fight with the Cadere curdles and deforms, yet Tethys feels every sensation experienced by his father that day. It appears in glimpses, like pulling something up from beneath dark water before it slips back down into the depths.*

*He gasps at the pain that wracks his body when one of the Cadere lashes his flail into Angron's side, and dread fills him as he watches Oenomaus struggle to survive the assault. He sees something then that he has never seen before from his father as he knows him. He watches his primarch fight side by side with a fellow warrior, striking and hacking and blocking the killing blows meant for one another, with all thought of themselves left behind. He isn't fighting alone, like he does with his sons. For the first time, Tethys sees brotherhood in Angron.*

*The fight lasts for seventeen minutes. Seventeen minutes of hot, screaming, bleeding violence. Tethys loses count of the times when the combat is balanced on a knife's edge, where an instant could tilt the odds against Angron and Oenomaus. The Cadere are unlike any foe Angron has faced, fast and strong and stripped away to a hurt, bestial core. But his primarch is Angron the Unbeaten, and after seventeen minutes, when the last Cadere's head rolls from his shoulders after a blow from his axe, Tethys' gene-sire remains so.*

*Angron helps Oenomaus to his feet. The veteran snarls from the pain of a wounded leg, but he is able to stand. The crowd cheers their names in a*

*roar of jubilation after witnessing such a spectacle. Rare is the occasion to see one of the Cadere bested upon the hot dust. To see two of them fall is truly a sight indeed.*

*'And yet,' comes the buzzing of the maggot's eyes once more, 'the multitudes of Desh'ea remain unsatisfied. You two are great warriors, and favourites of the crowd. What say you, my people? Shall we see who is greater, in a fight to the death?'*

*The people of Desh'ea roar their assent. The blood of dozens of men and mutants has not been enough, nor is that of two of the Cadere. They want more. And they want Angron and Oenomaus to give it to them.*

*'No.'*

*The single word silences the arena, carrying effortlessly from the centre of the pit. Oenomaus turns, looking at the young man he has raised like his own son, standing against the will of the high-riders.*

*'No?' sneer the maggot's eyes, the machines crackling with irritation as they swarm around Angron. 'It is not the place of Angron-Thal'kr to say no. Fight now, and kill him in spectacular fashion, and we shall forget your disobedience this one time.'*

*'I will not fight him,' says Angron. He brandishes his axe, and the maggot's eyes scatter from him. He raises the weapon, pointing it up at the gilded balconies that sit atop the arena. 'If you want to feed more blood to these people so badly, then come down yourselves and face me. Or do the paper-skinned high-riders lack the courage?'*

*'Angron,' Oenomaus warns.*

*'No,' Angron snarls. 'No more! Our whole lives we have killed for them. They who have taken everything from us. I will not allow them to take you as well.'*

*Oenomaus looks at Angron, his scarred features beaming with pride. He spreads his arms wide, turning to where their masters watch. 'Come on then, fight us!' He throws his weapons down. 'We'll use no weapons if that will put steel in your backs rather than jelly.'*

*Laughter begins to ripple across the crowd. None have ever witnessed such a thing, for slaves in the pits to rebuke and insult the high-riders. The soldiers posted at intervals across the arena grip their weapons tighter, their eyes locked as are all the others' on the rulers of Nuceria, and the maggot's eyes they speak through.*

*'Insolent curs,' shriek the machines. 'You dare to think the highborn rulers*

*would dirty themselves by drawing anywhere near the presence of slaves? Ridiculous.'*

*The maggot's eyes descend, electricity crackling around their metal forms. 'You are dogs, born to bleed for your betters. Your lives have no value, and never have. Dogs,' they repeat. 'And a dog who does not cringe before its master must be altered until he does so.'*

*A hush spreads over the crowd. Angron finds himself looking down at the severed head of the Cadere he killed, and the implants gleaming from where they thread his skull.*

*'Fair people of Desh'ea, what are we to do?'*

*A chant fills the arena, a single word in the lilting tongue of the Nucerians. It is a word that Tethys knows all too well, and it chills him to his core.*

'NAILS!' *the crowd cries.* 'NAILS! NAILS! NAILS!'

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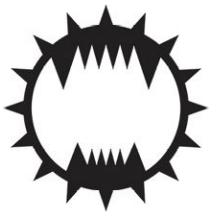

# NINETEEN

Moving in silence through the heart of the *Conqueror*, Hanno raised his fist, halting the brother behind him as they reached the door to Gahlan Surlak's laboratory.

The pair of saboteurs had taken no chances, walking across the skin of the World Eaters flagship and gaining entry by an auxiliary service hatch. They stalked inside in stripped-down armour, following a circuitous path they had memorised that would lead them to their target without being detected.

The doorway to the laboratory loomed over Hanno. He shot his brother a glance, and gave a swift nod. The World Eater, his armour marked red to display his training with the Mechanicum, sent a pulse signal to another legionary within the ship's generatorium control district. Moments later, the power across the entire deck was severed, and the laboratory was plunged into darkness.

A low clunk signalled that the magnetic seal locking the door had deactivated. Working swiftly, the World Eaters sprang out from the corridor,

punching into the bulkhead seam with pry bars. They would have just fifteen seconds before power was rerouted and the outage restored by backup systems. Grunting with the effort, Hanno and the Techmarine wrenched a gap open, hauling the inoperative bulkhead just wide enough to admit them.

A Mechanicum adept jolted back, wailing in binaric cant, as the legionaries appeared within the laboratory. The noise stopped abruptly as Hanno rammed a knife into the adept's spine.

The World Eaters split up, fanning out across the chamber. They slipped past iron slabs occupied by dissected Ghennans and their own dead brothers, not sparing a glance at the horrors spread out across the room as they searched for the central cogitators holding Gahlan Surlak's research or any working prototypes of the Butcher's Nails.

Hanno stopped before a row of stasis plinths set against a wall. Running on independent power sources, the caskets contained every iteration of the Butcher's Nails that Gahlan Surlak had created, hanging in the icy glow of a stasis field. Each of the plinths was marked with a red saltire, with readouts listing the details of what had caused each prototype to fail – all except for the last one. Contained within the last plinth was a crest of silver cabling and sub-cranial nodes, ones that looked almost identical to the primarch's own.

The soft clack of ceramite sounded as Hanno entered the command to open the stasis field. The protective crystal sheath enclosing the field peeled back before him, as he reached to take the implants in his hands.

All of this occurred in those fifteen seconds, and the secondary generators engaged. Secondary lumens thrummed to life, lending the huge chamber a weak gloom and throwing a trio of shadows into long, twisted view against the wall.

Hanno turned as the Techmarine collapsed in a twitching heap. He grunted as he felt something small and sharp prick his neck.

'Hello, dimachurias,' said Gahlan Surlak.

Hanno spun on his heel to face the Apothecary, but his vision kept on spinning after he had stopped. He reached up and tugged the dart from his neck, staring at it as his eyes lost focus and he thudded to his knees.

'Potent, isn't it?' said Gahlan. 'Fabius of the Third shared that delightful concoction with me, when last we met. He is an irksome little creature, to be sure, but let it never be said that he is not an inspired alchemist.'

Gahlan sank to his haunches before Hanno, watching as tiny black webs swelled over the World Eater's flesh. 'Now, your hearts are liquefying as we speak, so tell me why you came here.'

Hanno said nothing, stifling a cough as black foam bubbled from his lips, and hauled himself back to his feet.

'Ah, a faithful brother to the end.' Gahlan tilted his head. 'Well, to your own centurion at least. What did Mago tell you when he sent you here?' The Apothecary sighed. 'I had hoped that by showing him what I had found, we could avoid something like this. That he would understand the folly of his actions.'

Hanno stumbled again. Gahlan extended a hand, keeping the dimachurias upright. With a grunt Hanno pulled his knife from his belt. His fingers would not obey him, and the blade clattered to the deck. Gahlan gave a short, weary laugh.

'You still don't understand what we are on the verge of accomplishing here, do you? You think that you will kill me, destroy my life's work and then, what? Angron will change his mind?' Gahlan withdrew his hand, and Hanno slumped to his hands and knees.

'I've learned so much recreating the Butcher's Nails,' said Gahlan as he slowly circled his stricken brother. 'Not just about the primarch, but about us. Each and every one of us, Hanno, you and even I myself, we are like an incomplete puzzle. Not incomplete because we lack the proper pieces, no, but because we have too many. We have gone out into the stars to render conquest, to sweep the galaxy clean of any who would oppose the Imperium of Man, but we have been weighed down by the vestiges of humanity that hold us back. Hesitation, conscience, a desire to survive more than to kill. Things like this don't aid us in our conquests, they hinder us.'

Gahlan smiled. 'The Nails are going to sweep that all away. Those clinging traces of humanity will be excised, and all that will be left is rage. A rage that will conquer the galaxy.'

Hanno attempted to reach for the Apothecary, his hands swiping at thin air before he unbalanced and sprawled back onto the deck.

'Oh, Hanno.' Gahlan shook his head. 'You are like a dull blade, fighting in ignorance to remain that way in the face of becoming sharp, honed, *perfect*. That is something that Fabius and his gilded ilk have never understood. Perfection has never been about the body, or even the mind. Perfection is a state only the soul can achieve, and, my poor, ignorant brother, there is such

perfection in rage. And though you will never experience it, the Legion, all of our brothers, will.’

Hanno fought to stand and Gahlan caught him as he fell, holding him as he slid down to the deck. He loomed over Hanno, watching intently at the darkening blood vessels bloomed across his face.

‘The toxin will kill you sure enough,’ said Gahlan. ‘But I wonder…’ One of the mechanical arms of his chirurgeon folded forward over his shoulder, the diamond-tipped drill at its end whirring as it spun to life. ‘I wonder if there is yet a debt of agony that a betrayal such as this demands.’ The drill advanced, drawing closer to his face. ‘What would the primarch say, if he were here? I feel quite confident he would think there is.’

‘You will be stopped,’ Hanno snarled. ‘The future you want will not come to pass – we will destroy it.’

‘No, no, kinsman.’ Gahlan smiled as the drill slowly descended into his brother’s eye. ‘For it is the future that shall destroy you.’

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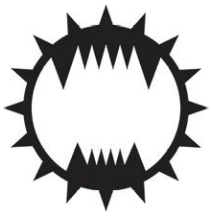

# TWENTY

Mago scanned the ranks of the assembled Legion as they massed within the Triumphal Hall. The commanders and champions of every company had been summoned to report immediately to the *Conqueror*. Mago had arrived, leaving Astakos in command of the *Hound's Tooth*, meeting Orontes, who was already aboard the flagship on the centurion's orders.

Tension stiffened Mago's posture and made his thoughts brittle. He had received no word from Hanno after he had sent him to Gahlan's laboratory. Was the purpose of this gathering the news that the recreation of the Butcher's Nails had been destroyed? And who had given the summons? Had the primarch awakened?

The commanders turned at the sound of a new arrival. The doorway parted, revealing a beaming Gahlan Surlak. Mago's heart turned to stone. The Apothecary's smile, and the servitor following him holding a reinforced stasis casket, told him that his attempt to destroy the implants had failed, and that Hanno was dead. The centurion's hand fell to the

pommel of his axe. Against everything he had wanted, it would have to come to open warfare to stop the Nails.

‘Brothers,’ said Gahlan Surlak. ‘Thank you all for arriving upon the flagship so promptly.’ The Apothecary strode between the ranks of World Eaters, ascending the dais and turning to face his kindred.

‘This most recent conflict, the battle to return the world of Ninety-Three Fifteen into Imperial compliance, has been one of great cost and challenge. Brothers have been lost, and bonds of loyalty strained.’

Gahlan looked out, his smile flickering almost imperceptibly as he met Mago’s gaze. ‘Our primarch lies comatose, and the Legion stands in dark, uncertain times. Each of us struggles to find unity, to find the right path forward for the Legion. Today, after years of searching, I bring you that path. I bring you that unity.’

With a nod from the Apothecary, the servitor at Gahlan’s side released the bindings enclosing the stasis casket, revealing a bundle of silver cabling and circuitry hanging in the energy field.

‘Behold,’ said Gahlan. ‘The Butcher’s Nails. A stable recreation of our primarch’s own enhancements, ready for the Legion at last.’

A stunned silence filled the Triumphal Hall, broken by murmurs as the World Eaters digested the enormity of the Apothecary’s achievement. What for so long had merely been a dream, a promise that threatened to never be fulfilled, was now realised. And the XII Legion would never be the same.

‘The only question that remains is,’ said Gahlan, ‘who shall be the first?’

Mago shared hurried glances with the nearest commanders he could trust. Their hands closed around their weapons. Orontes looked at Mago in alarm. If they wanted to put a stop to this, they would have to act now.

‘I will.’

Mago froze. He turned in the direction of the voice. Khârn stepped forward to stand before Gahlan Surlak. The Eighth captain removed his helm and stared at the Apothecary with eyes of cold blue.

‘I will, brother. Give me the Nails.’

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# PART THREE

## HAMMER AND NAILS

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*‘The moment Angron was given mastery over us, we stopped being what the Emperor wanted, and became what our father wanted instead. How could He have not foreseen the madness to come when it was He who made it happen? Or did He even care, so long as we spilt the blood that He needed spilled to expand His realm? If you desire to cast fault for the path that the XII Legion embarked upon, the true blame could be placed nowhere other than at the Throne of Terra, at His feet.’*

– Eighth Captain Khârn,
from his unpublished treatise *The Eighteen Legions*

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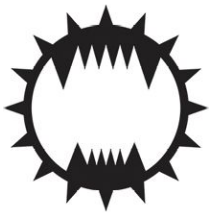

# TWENTY-ONE

Many years before, an alarm wailed across the whole of the XII Legion.

The call went out to every vessel, in every expeditionary fleet where the World Eaters fought across the span of the Great Crusade, asking a single, simple question.

*Is the primarch aboard?*

The commanders of every ship scoured their decks, abandoning all but the most necessary of duties in search of the Legion's master. World Eaters covered every passage, chamber and storeroom, casting light upon areas that had been dark for decades. But none of them would find Angron. It was then that comprehensive auspex collating, taking count of every vessel at the XII Legion's disposal, would detect the absence of the frigate *Descending Edge*.

Angron was gone.

Khârn left the compliance that the bulk of the XII was poised to begin to the other senior officers, translating from the system and taking three of the

fleet’s fastest ships with him. He would return with their father, or he would not return.

Two years passed. Two years of leaping at shadows, of sifting through the trails left behind from long-cold warp translations and the ghosts of auspex traffic. Two years before Khârn would look down upon a world, and the cold inert shape of the *Descending Edge* hanging in its orbit.

The frigate was a tomb, its decks lightless and its reactor heart cold. Khârn and his brothers moved through the *Descending Edge*, swiftly combing every corridor and passageway in search of their father. All they found were bodies.

Imperial warships were designed to function as parts of a greater whole, particularly smaller escort vessels like the *Edge*. A frigate of her size could operate independent of a fleet for a time, but two years was a long enough period away from resupply to deplete the on-board reserves needed to keep the ship – and her crew – alive.

Malnourished shapes lay slumped in silent repose throughout the ship’s corridors and habitation quarters. The squads of World Eaters searching across the interior districts voxed to Khârn that the entirety of the vessel’s rations and drinking water had been exhausted no sooner than four months prior. All that remained alive aboard the frigate were the servitors necessary for the ship’s most basic operation. The living crew was gone, though Khârn’s squads did determine that some of the ship’s sanctuary pods had been jettisoned.

Standing on a bridge that was as silent as the rest of the *Descending Edge*, Khârn ordered his brothers to return to their own ships, to coordinate the redistribution of crew and slaves needed to get the *Edge* operational and back to the Legion. As this logistical ballet played out, Khârn rode his Stormbird down through the clouds of the planet below, a gently turning orb of amber and jade, covered in dense jungles and studded with colossal mountain ranges. That was the only place left for him to look. The last place that Angron could be.

Khârn had ordered the Legion’s artificers, as they laboured alongside the adepts of Mars to forge Angron’s armour, to place transponders within the dense bronze plates. This way, in the event that his father lost control and disappeared into the depths of the *Conqueror*, Khârn and the Legion would be able to find him. It had felt like a betrayal, in Khârn’s mind. Attaching such tethers to his own primarch made him feel less a son and more a

gaoler, if Khârn had ever had to use them. And to his shame, he now did.

With a small squad of his brothers, Khârn cut his way through the suffocating jungle that covered the surface of the planet, his eyes never straying from the auspex chiming in his other hand. The device pulsed stronger the closer they came, and soon the World Eaters no longer had to hack away at the primordial vegetation obstructing them. A path had already been cleared.

They walked deeper into the heart of the jungle, travelling across well-trodden ground. The canopy stole the sky above them, plunging them into a humid twilight. It became so dense overhead that Khârn could not tell whether it was night or day when they finally found the cave.

A ragged entrance yawned before them, as though some immense being had punched it into the base of the mountain the World Eaters had never even realised was there. The opening towered over Khârn, nearly high enough to admit a Warhound Scout Titan, but what lay within was impossible to discern as, after a few metres, the interior plunged into total blackness.

Khârn knelt at the entrance to the cave. His fingers brushed over an impression made in the ground. A footprint, huge but unmistakeably human. He smelt the air, taking in the scents of stone and vegetation, and caught the spice of blood.

‘Wait here,’ said Khârn, gesturing for his brothers to remain outside the cave. He removed his helm and set it down along with the auspex, but kept his axe. Their father had never respected a man who didn’t have a weapon in his hand.

The darkness of the cave enveloped Khârn as he stepped inside. That strange, hollow echo of subterranean life rang softly from the smooth stone walls. Every few seconds the sharp drip of water would plink down from the tips of the stalactites that hung in clusters in the shadows overhead, the tiny movements of the droplets catching Khârn’s transhuman senses.

A myriad of tunnels branched out before him, spreading in all directions leading through the mountain. The passage that Khârn would follow, though, was easy to choose. Of all the different paths for him to take, there was only one that was strewn with bones.

He followed it, stepping over the loose bundles of ribs and skulls, careful not to snap any of them beneath his tread. There was a strange kind of care in the way they had been placed, like some kind of savage tribal shrine left

in offering to a terrible god.

The echoes grew louder and longer as the passage opened out to a vast cave. Khârn's eyes pierced the gloom without trouble, but even so its full scale was hard to discern. Fluted columns of stalagmites rose from the floor like choirs of stone praetorians, rising behind a small mountain of bones that filled the centre of the cave. The brutal geology had a macabre grandeur to it, like a tomb.

Or a throne room.

'I knew they would send you, Khârn,' a voice rumbled out from atop the great mound of bones. 'I knew no matter where I went, one day I would find you standing there.'

Relief flooded through Khârn at hearing the voice of his father. His mind raced with things to say, to tell the primarch of what had happened since his disappearance, of battles won and honours earned, but he pushed them aside. He had to ask Angron a question, the only question to ask.

'Why?'

'No people here,' Angron said as Khârn looked over the scattered bones. 'Not civilised ones anyway. Just tribal bands, simple creatures that bring me the bones of their kills and tell me of monsters.' The primarch gestured to the immense fanged skull he sat upon, running his hand almost lovingly down the dirty length of its snout. 'Monsters for me to hunt and be hunted by. Like in simpler times.'

'No.' Khârn shook his head. He took a step closer, standing at the foot of the mound. 'Angron, why are you here? Why have you left your Legion?'

'I don't think this world has a name.' Angron ignored his son. 'This isn't the first one I went to. I've been to over a dozen during these past years. Walking *ugh* across their surfaces, trying to find something strong enough to kill me.'

'To kill you?' Khârn narrowed his eyes.

'Yes, Khârn,' said Angron impatiently. 'To kill me. I'm not supposed to be here any more.'

Khârn opened his mouth to speak, to press his gene-sire to talk sense, but no words came to him. Silence lingered between them in the darkness of the cave.

'If you want to die,' Khârn finally said to break the silence, 'why not simply detonate the warp core of the *Descending Edge*? End it all in a single moment of fire, out in the void?'

‘Because that is not the way they died!’ Angron bellowed. He snorted, clawing bloody phlegm from the mashed ruin of his nose. ‘I wasn’t there when it happened, where I was supposed to be, but I know how my family, my true family, met its end.’

Angron hefted a crude axe of timber and knapped flint in his fist, its edge flaking with the dried blood of some vast apex predator. ‘With weapons filling their hands, and an enemy’s blood on their faces. Howling out their last breaths as they went to oblivion in honour, in glory. I was meant to die like that, Khârn. With them.’

His breathing slowed as he stared down at the axe. ‘I can’t go back and die at their side, like I was supposed to. He stole me away, threw me out into this galaxy to fight His meaningless wars, but even then nothing has changed.’

Angron looked up. ‘I never left the hot dust, Khârn. Not really. It’s here, there, everywhere. It follows me, itching beneath my skin and coating my lungs in its poison. Your *Emperor*,’ Angron spat. ‘That thing that demands I call it father, He’s just another high-rider, the same master that has always been there, just wearing a different mask.’

Angron clawed at his scalp. His fingers ran over the dull silver of the Butcher’s Nails. Khârn watched his father, knowing that the implants were spiking his blood with rage, torturing him until he relented to their demand to spill blood.

‘I won’t meet my end serving as a tool of that golden tyrant who ripped me out from my destiny,’ said Angron. ‘I won’t give him that satisfaction. So I left. *Hnng*, I left it all, and went out here, hoping to find something that would end me the way I want. The way they did.’

‘And what would they say to you,’ said Khârn, ‘your brothers and sisters, if they saw you now? They looked up to you, they needed you, and they fought by your side to the death without you ever having to ask. What would they say seeing you abandon us, those who look up to you and need you and would die for you, to run away to sit alone and maudlin in this cave? If they were anything like you say they were, sire, they would call you a coward.’

Angron rose from the skull. Khârn stood his ground as his father descended, bones scattering and tumbling down in a clattering cascade in the primarch’s wake. ‘Do you think because I didn’t kill you after Desh’ea, that I never will?’ Angron’s hands tensed into claws. ‘You think I won’t

pull your head from your neck if I choose to?’

‘Of course not,’ answered Khârn. ‘You are a primarch.’ He tapped his heart with his fingertips. ‘*My* primarch. My life was yours before we ever found you, to do with as you see fit.’

Angron snorted, and spat blood onto the floor of the cave. ‘Then go away, Khârn. Go back to fighting your nothing wars for that high-rider tyrant.’

‘Your Legion needs you,’ Khârn pressed. ‘Your sons need you.’

‘You aren’t my sons. I never wanted you, and I didn’t make you. *He* did, so go and haunt Him, why don’t you? I never asked for any of this! I never asked to be thrown into the stars to be nothing more than a slave building another man’s dream.’

‘It isn’t just His dream, Angron. It is humanity’s. The empire we are building, it will belong to all of us.’

‘Empire.’ Angron sneered the word. ‘What empire has ever been anything more than the ruins that are discovered by the one that rises after it? They never last, Khârn. Ever. And neither will this one.’

‘It will,’ said Khârn. ‘If you help us to build it. If you lend your strength in laying its foundations by standing at the head of your Legion and fighting to unite all of humanity.’

‘The humanity you want to unite,’ Angron said softly, glancing up and slowly pacing around in the dark. ‘They kept us in caves like this, Khârn. The high-riders. Thousands of us, packed against one another in the dark, in the cold. That is what we do with our own, killing and enslaving each other in fear and weakness. They aren’t strong enough. None of you are. You just aren’t strong enough.’

‘Then come back with me,’ pleaded Khârn. ‘Return, and show us the way. Teach your sons to be as strong as their father. We will do whatever you ask of us – I swear that oath to you now and always.’

Angron stopped. For a long moment there was silence between them, save for the soft pattering of moisture in the cave, and the primarch’s pained breath. Slowly, Angron looked back at Khârn, the absence of light doing nothing to dispel the intensity of his yellowed, glaring eyes.

‘Whatever I command?’

When Khârn’s thoughts returned to the present, they did so in a wave that crashed across every one of his senses. The thrumming rattle of servitors and machines, layered with the hurried movement and speech of medicae

thralls. The cold prickling at his bare flesh. The tang of counterseptics, and of ozone bleeding from active machinery, both filling his nose and coating his tongue. And the white glare of high-powered lumen globes, painfully bright as they focused on him, in the last moments before the surgery began.

‘For the implantation, we will need you to stand.’

The Apothecary gestured towards a recessed surgical pit cut into the deck of the apothecarion. Khârn stepped down into the pit, his face bearing its usual calm façade as servitors affixed restraints and chains that splayed his limbs wide and locked them in place. A heavy iron collar encased his neck and the lower half of his face to keep him from moving his head.

‘We begin.’

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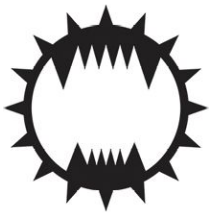

# TWENTY-TWO

Preliminary procedures for the implantation remained the same as with every iteration that had come before. Khârn's scalp was shaved completely, and the skin daubed with counterseptics and sanitiser gels that scoured away the top layer of skin to render it sterile. Medicae servitors played the red beams of their false eyes over Khârn, measuring the exact points where the Nails would be inserted and marking them with the barely perceptible scars of precision laser etching. The mechanical slaves climbed out of the pit, shuffling aside as Khârn's brothers began their part in the procedure.

Bonesaws and drills whirred as the Apothecaries and Techmarines cut the openings through skin, flesh and skull, withdrawing neatly excised discs of blood-slick bone and dropping them into the steel trays arrayed around the surgical pit.

The bulk of this newest iteration of the implants was comprised of a pair of fluted metal spikes, slightly shorter than the length of a legionary's hand. Each was open at the rear, crested with a plume of snaking wires as fine as

human hair. Apart from the wires, the Butcher's Nails looked every bit their epithet. It was fitting, then, that they would be driven in with a hammer.

The first blow rang with the contact of metal upon metal, and the soft sigh of the spike sinking into meat. The hammering that followed was far more delicate than the first, short measured thuds that pushed the Nail fully into Khârn's brain.

Rows of connection ports were cut and sutured into place across the back of Khârn's head as a mane of silver segmented cabling was threaded into his skull. The cables were joined with the wiring jutting from the Nails, fashioning what looked like a crest of metallic dreadlocks running across the rear half of Khârn's skull, their appearance almost identical to that of Angron's own implants.

At first, Khârn thought it was the twinned beat of his hearts, the dormant second roused to action by the trauma of having his skull drilled open and his brain altered. But it was not. It was something too quick to be the drums in his chest, yet still stinging from within his blood. An insistent pulse, ratcheting sharper and sharper with every passing moment.

*Tick. Tick. Tick.*

Khârn's head began to tilt, the muscles of his face twitching in bouts of involuntary spasm. His manacled hands clenched and unclenched into fists, snapping his chains taut in jolts of clashing links.

*Tick. Tick-tick. Tick.*

The Apothecary was staring down at him, face impassive behind his white helm. He pulled the mask free, the face beneath creased in concerned curiosity. Staring at Khârn like an insect pinned for study, like a nothing, like–

*–tick-tick-tick-tick-tick–*

'Khârn?' came his muffled voice, barely audible over the pounding blood and the white-hot needles in his brain. Khârn could not tear his eyes from the vein in the Apothecary's temple, pulsing with the blood beating out from his heart. 'Khârn, *tick* can *tick* you *tick* hear *tick* me?'

Khârn's nerves were burning. His blood was turning to poison. He felt control ebb from his limbs, but they were not going numb or slack. New strength was coursing into them, filling them to bursting, the veins rising to bulge across his musculature like swollen tributaries.

The restraints broke in a string of snapping metal links. Khârn heard the rushed voices around him as they backed away, sounding so thin, so *weak*,

spurring his rage even higher as he tore the collar loose and surged up out of the pit to face them.

An ululating cry ripped out from Khârn's throat, a bestial noise beyond what even a transhuman should be capable of, as he –

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– it came apart in his hands, and he threw it aside. Awareness snapped back into Khârn, like a fever slackening but not fully leaving him. A heavy, metallic musk filled his nostrils, as familiar to him as it was unmistakable. His head twisted and jerked from side to side as he took in his surroundings with wide, bulging eyes, seeing what the apothecarion had become.

Abattoir was too cold a word to describe it, too poetic. A butcher used tools to cleanly carve meat, according to the rhyme and reason of his trade. There was no rhyme or reason present here, and the rending had been done by hand. Bodies were slumped haphazardly around him, their limbs ripped free and hurled aside, their flesh pulled apart to expose the glistening gore within, their blood poured over the deck plating and splashed against the walls. Even the chamber itself was red, stained crimson from lumen strips

coated in arterial spray.

Khârn didn't remember doing any of it, despite the marrow-deep conviction that it was he who had wrought this slaughter. He finally understood the blind fury that seized hold of Angron every time he was compelled to spill blood. For the first time, he had been lost to the Nails.

The body beneath Khârn was still thrashing, clawing in futility with arms half torn from their sockets. Khârn reached down, pressing his brow to the warrior's helm, and smashed down. The impacts rang out across the red room, again, and again, until the ceramite shattered along with the skull within. Khârn let his brother go then, exhaling furnace heat from a ruined face sheeted in blood. His fingers scraped at the faceplate, seeking purchase to tear it loose and taste the last vitality of the life ending beneath.

Heavy footfalls crunched broken glass. A new shadow appeared, stretching over Khârn where he crouched atop his mutilated kin. He whirled about, hands curled into blood-slick claws. The primal snarl died in his throat, as he saw who was standing over him.

'Do you see now?' asked Angron. The primarch reached down, running blunt fingertips across the silver cables of Khârn's implants. Khârn twitched, his synapses screaming out their demands for violence at being touched, but awe kept him fixed in place.

'Do you see?'

With a soft crackle of bloody froth, Khârn's jaw unclenched. Bits of broken teeth spilled from his lips to scatter across the deck, not all of them his own. 'Y-yes.'

Angron straightened, returning to his full, towering height. For the first time, Khârn did not see the aloof revulsion that had always been writ across his father's face. Rather, the dark metal pegs that stood in place of Angron's teeth were bared, not in feral challenge, but in some ugly approximation of approval. Perhaps even pride.

'Then come.' Angron smiled, and offered Khârn his hand. 'Come with me, my son.'

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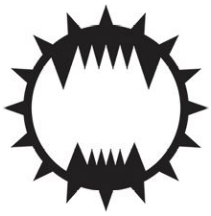

# TWENTY-THREE

‘My lord?’ Shock marked the face of Gahlan Surlak as Angron emerged into the corridor. He fell into hurried step beside the hulking primarch. ‘I was not told you had awakened, how are–’

‘You succeeded,’ said Angron. He glared sidelong at the Apothecary. ‘Finally. I had hoped you would eventually grow tired of failure. How many can you make?’

Gahlan looked back at Khârn, prowling behind Angron like a caged animal, and cleared his throat. ‘Production, implantation, these things were never an impediment to us, sire. Creating the correct prototype was. Now that we have synthesised a model that is stable, that is survivable, we can implant them into the Legion at speed.’

‘How quickly?’ asked Angron impatiently.

‘Give me a few hours, sire, to implant the stock we have already manufactured,’ said Gahlan, quickly recovering from the shock of Angron’s return. ‘A few hours, and I will give you a thousand true sons, recast in

their father’s image at last.’

‘We can still stop this.’

Mago moved at speed through the corridors of the *Conqueror*, flanked by the commanders who still remained in league with him. The call had gone out, a thousand warriors to step forth and join Khârn in having the Butcher’s Nails hammered into their skulls. A thousand had been requested, and more than half of the Legion present above Ghenna answered. Including Mago’s own First Axe.

‘*Is it true?*’ voxed Astakos from the *Hound’s Tooth*. ‘*Is Angron awake?*’

‘Yes,’ replied Mago. Orontes’ decision still stung, though he knew it was inevitable. The Legion was flooding into Gahlan’s embrace to be given the implants, as Mago’s allies evaporated with each passing moment. If there was any time when he needed his champion, it was now.

‘I’m gathering whatever force remains to us,’ said Mago to his standard bearer. ‘Rally whoever you can trust aboard the *Tooth*, and be ready to make planetfall when I arrive.’

‘*Planetfall?*’

‘Angron and Khârn are waiting on the embarkation deck,’ explained Mago. ‘Waiting to mass enough with the Nails before returning to the surface of Ghenna. Whatever they are looking for down there, we have to beat them to it.’

‘*What could be down there that is of interest to the primarch?*’ asked Astakos.

‘If the Ghennans’ technology was the key to recreating the Nails,’ said Mago as he moved deeper into the heart of the *Conqueror*, ‘then perhaps it can help us to unmake them. If we can find the means to remove the Nails, then Khârn and our brothers can be saved. Angron can be saved. And we will finally have the father we have always wanted. But any hope of that is gone if they discover it first.’

‘*If you intend to face Angron and a thousand of our kin with the Nails,*’ said Astakos, ‘*we are going to need something to turn the odds in our favour.*’

Heavy tread boomed from behind the doorway. Mago and the other World Eaters came to a halt, as the chamber door rumbled open.

‘Just be ready for a fight when I arrive,’ said Mago, giving a thin smile. ‘I am bringing someone back with me.’

‘Well then,’ said Lhorke. ‘Why do we stand here talking?’

*There is no clear memory of when Angron takes the Butcher’s Nails. He was drugged near to death to drag him from the caves and bring him to the dark tower where the high-riders’ technomancers dwelt. From there, the vision is fractured, unclear and lanced with reddened cobwebs of agony.*

*From then on, every memory is glimpsed as though seen through a veil of blood. He wakes, no longer in the tower, but chained to a wall. Then time shifts, and he is fighting in the arena. Tethys tries to parse what is happening, but he feels Angron’s pain as his own, and it paralyses him. He can only watch the flickering images and mismatched sounds, like a damaged vid feed.*

*Sand scatters. The distant roar of thousands of throats. He hears his name being screamed, right before his face, ending with the crash of his fists against a shattering skull.*

*By the time sense returns to Angron, and the Butcher’s Nails leech back enough for Tethys to witness the memory clearly, Angron is alone again, manacled within his lightless cell. His every limb is bound to the wall with dense, heavy chains. He takes in the air in short, pained breaths hissed through clenched teeth. And the Nails, they send torment stabbing through every cell in his body.*

*And the blood. He is covered in it. Its metallic stink fills his nose and it is still warm as it drips from his chin. His skull throbs from the Butcher’s Nails. His skin is fever hot as his body tries to heal over them as if they are any other wound. But it can’t.*

*That is when Angron hears it. He hears the guards speaking together, laughing as they count their winnings after Oenomaus was butchered in the pit. He hears them say the name. The name of the one who had killed the only father he had ever known and desecrated his remains.*

*That it was he, Angron, who had slain Oenomaus.*

*The air is driven from his lungs. An invisible fist has entered his chest, crushing his heart in its grip. Angron sags forward, as far as his chains allow before they snap taut.*

*Oenomaus. The wisest of them, the best of them. The one who had spent decades readying the slaves for the uprising. The only one who could rally the gladiators to stand as one and throw off the high-riders’ oppression.*

*Gone. By his hand.*

*The howl that rips from Angron's lips shakes the walls. It is so loud that it rouses the entire arena guard to scramble, fearing a slave rebellion. He screams, even after his throat tears and blood bursts from his lips. It continues on for three days, a scream of such sadness and pain nothing like it has ever been heard before, or since.*

*Tethys feels Angron's mind close with the scream. It is pushing him out, caught up in the waves of noise and lament until his consciousness peels loose from the primarch in a storm of blinding light.*

The diagnostic cogitators tethered to him came alive, spitting out reams of stamped parchment reporting the changes coming over him. Alarms triggered, filling the small apothecarion with the sharp song of their klaxons. Servitors jerked to life, drawn out of inactivity by the clamour. They came forward, on wheels or tracks or stiff, half-human legs, to see to the warrior who lay prone before them.

Tethys' eyes opened.

Mago ran through the corridors of the *Hound's Tooth*. The past hours had been a blur as he hurried to organise and lead the brothers loyal to him down to the surface to stop the primarch, when word reached him. The only news that could divert him from his task.

The doors to the tertiary apothecarion opened, and Mago rushed in to find Tethys, upright and awakened from his unnatural slumber. The centurion pushed through the medical servitors crowding around the Lexicanum. 'Brother?'

'Take me to Angron,' said Tethys, seizing Mago by the wrist. 'Take me now.'

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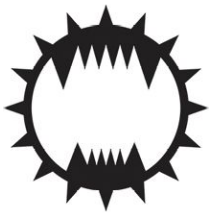

# TWENTY-FOUR

The swarm of drop-ships hurtled down from the void, trailing tails of fire as they cut through the atmosphere. There was no order to their flight, no carefully aligned formation or smooth, efficient flight path. The World Eaters returned to Ghenna in a storm of noise and speed, with their primarch at the vanguard.

A curious sensation rushed over Khârn as he snarled in his restraint throne beside his father. Angron and his reborn sons strained at the leash, desperate to take to the field. Each of them felt the energy, something they had all experienced once before but that had long since been forgotten. For the first time since he had taken up a blade for the Emperor on Terra, war felt new to Khârn.

Of the thousand that Angron had taken with him from the Legion fleet, most of Khârn's Eighth Assault Company were there with him, their scalps raw from the Butcher's Nails freshly hammered into their heads. As the ground rushed up to meet the invading legionaries, several of them didn't

wait until the gunships had come to a hover before clawing open the airlocks and leaping from their holds, dropping dozens of metres to land with bone-crushing force on the ground below. They sprang to their feet without pause, sprinting towards the enemy as though nothing had happened.

'This is how it should have been, Khârn,' said Angron as the primarch rose from his own restraint throne in the hold of their Stormbird. Khârn stood as well, moving at his father's side towards the lowering assault ramp. 'Now this Legion's history can truly begin.'

Ghenna spilled out before Khârn as the ramp descended. Hatred spiked within him, and the black twist he had gouged into his flesh burned. They leapt down, hitting the ground at a run, Angron laughing as he revved *Widowmaker*'s teeth.

Khârn found himself laughing alongside his gene-sire, weapon raised, its tracks of bladed teeth blurring. He would inflict a terrible vengeance upon this world and its uncanny abominations. The rage, the power that the Nails sent screaming through his blood, it felt pure. The violence he would wreak, the slaughter, it felt *right*.

The Ghennans had suffered catastrophic losses in the first invasion. Enough of their population had died across the planet to drive any other civilisation of comparable size into extinction. But as the World Eaters had learned, the true Ghennans had yet to reveal themselves.

Their proxies came out in a smiling, robed multitude once more, though this time in a fraction of the number they had before. Several showed clear and horrific injuries, many with disparate portions of their hairless skulls quickly salvaged and soldered together so that they stared out at the coming World Eaters with mismatched eyes.

The Ghennans were expecting parlay. They believed that any rational being would have seen the horror and destruction of the past conflict and seek out an alternative means to bring about a resolution. They believed they could convince the Emperor's minions to overlook this single, insignificant world, and allow them to pursue their transcendence in peace.

Gone was the phalanx, the measured march of the shield wall and gleam of polished spear tips. Khârn and the other World Eaters had run since they made planetfall, and they ran faster as they caught sight of the Ghennans' modest horde. With Angron at their head, *Widowmaker* screaming in his

fists, they did not even slow down.

The two sides met, coming together like a siege hammer striking paper. Robed bodies flew back through the air amidst gouts of yellow blood. World Eaters ripped them apart, fighting as though they were wild beasts and not Space Marines. The false people simply did not have the overwhelming numbers of the last battle, and they could not slow or stand against any of the enraged World Eaters as the warriors hacked and tore their way through them. Not one of the legionaries stopped to admire their kills, still sprinting forward and killing anything that came within reach.

The scant few Ghennans that were left standing simply froze as the legionaries passed them by, the minds controlling them struggling to process what was happening. They watched as the World Eaters, minds aflame with the Butcher's Nails, entered their city, and the Ghennans counted their lives in hours.

They ran in loose packs at first, but that didn't last long. Each World Eater became his own army, going wherever the Nails led him as he surged down the avenues of Malkoya and butchered everything he saw. The vox came alive with an endless disjointed chorus of laughing and spitting and screaming, all set to the throaty roar of active chainblades.

It was not long before they depleted their ammunition. Each of the World Eaters relished the dry click as the chamber ran hollow. The Nails set a fire within their skulls, and they celebrated it as they threw their boltguns aside, forgotten. Now they could focus solely upon killing by hand.

Khârn was lost, drowning himself in the slaughter. With a chainaxe roaring in each hand, he buried them in body after body until they became so clogged with yellowed gore that the teeth could no longer move.

He came across a World Eater squatting over a dead Ghennan, his head jerking this way and that as he ate the corpse. Khârn left him to do as he pleased. He followed Angron, who moved like a hurricane towards the central spire of the city, where in his heart he knew the true enemy awaited.

The path of slaughter leading to the real inhabitants of Ghenna was an unbroken chain of brutalised false humanity. Simulacrum littered the ground in various states of butchery, all torn limb from limb and ripped to tatters by chainblades and bare transhuman hands.

Before the central spire, the proxies had massed, hoping to repel the invaders just as they had in the previous battle at the gates. But they had

lost the overwhelming numbers, and just as they were unaffected by morale in the face of the coming violence, they now stood against a foe who no longer knew restraint.

The slaughter continued. The Butcher's Nails propelled the World Eaters to untold heights of brutality, and the Ghennans could not have stopped them with ten times their numbers. Like heathen marauders of Old Earth, the legionaries tore down the entrance to the spire, swarming within and laying waste to all they found.

Khârn was pulling a false man's head from its shoulders when he heard the primarch's voice. 'Come, Khârn,' said Angron, pointing the dripping head of *Widowmaker* towards a wide maglev platform. 'Let us finish this.'

Khârn's breath feathered out before him as the platform descended, coming in quick impatient jets. With a dull thud of engaging locks, the World Eaters arrived before the minds that had controlled the insurgency against them. They faced their true enemy at long last.

Banks of crystal pods lined the walls in a cold blue honeycomb that stretched a hundred metres high. Within each of the pods, surrounded by thrumming machinery and thick spools of industrial cabling, was a human. Their bodies were pale, emaciated things, their spines curled and their flesh discoloured and swollen with cancerous growths.

Khârn rampaged through the chamber, closely followed by Gahlan Surlak, who was looking from pod to pod at the miserable creatures housed within. With only a few moments to evaluate them, Gahlan conveyed that the systems the real Ghennans had built around themselves were capable of prolonging and sustaining their lives, but not reversing the genetic disorders that had brought their civilisation to this nightmarish point.

Most of the Ghennans were still, bobbing gently in foetal repose, their withered bodies riven with snarls of cables. There were some, though, that were conscious. They stared out with weak, cloudy eyes, unable to move their atrophied limbs as the World Eaters advanced towards them. Khârn doubted they could see the World Eaters clearly, but he knew terror when he saw it. And the Ghennans were terrified.

'How many are there?' asked Khârn. His voice was sharp and tense, nearly biting the words. Even speaking was difficult now, as the Nails demanded he continue the slaughter. His hands clenched and unclenched around his weapons as he visualised himself tearing one of the cradles open to see how much the pitiful things inside could bleed.

‘Perhaps a thousand,’ said Gahlan. ‘Maybe a few more. Astonishing. That so few minds could create and inhabit billions of bodies. Think of it.’

Khârn gave the Apothecary a savage grin. ‘What would the Martian priests think of such a thing?’

Gahlan grinned, breathing out a short laugh. ‘Oh, the magi would pore over this place, leaving no secret unfound. Vel-Kheredar would wring every scrap of knowledge from here, and then he would burn it to the ground. Better that I have it, and I will decide which secrets I tell them.’

Surlak turned to the primarch. ‘Father, I must be allowed to study them. With these secrets I could create entire generations of legionaries in a fraction of the time it takes with the Emperor’s science.’

Angron looked upon the Ghennans for a long moment, his scarred features twisted by disgust. ‘No warriors here.’ He spat on the ground, and turned away. The ground shook with Angron’s steps as he left the chamber. ‘Do what you like with these miserable things, Apothecary. Just make them dead by the end of it.’

Gahlan bowed. ‘As you command, sire.’

Khârn lingered before one of the pods, watching the twisted human inside wriggle and squirm beneath his gaze. The markings along the pod were in the bizarre language of the Ghennans, but a chill crept up Khârn’s spine as he deciphered the name.

Ohna.

+Why?+

Khârn snarled at the wretch’s psychic intrusion that sent his Butcher’s Nails haywire. +Why could you not leave us in peace?+

Khârn’s axe smashed into the pod. He didn’t hear Gahlan Surlak cry out, demanding he stop as he hacked into the reinforced crystal until it shattered, spilling Ohna out onto the ground in a wash of amniotic filth. He took the Ghennan by the throat, tearing free the life-sustaining cables from his emaciated flesh as he raised him to eye level.

‘Because this galaxy belongs to us,’ hissed Khârn as he drew back his axe. ‘And in our galaxy, there is only war.’

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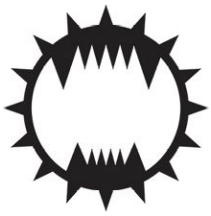

# TWENTY-FIVE

Mago followed the trail of death leading into Malkoya. He had managed to rally every brother who stood with him against the Butcher’s Nails, seizing upon the current chaos gripping the fleet to make planetfall in force and pursue Angron.

It had not been difficult to find their trail. Pieces of Ghennans littered the ground in a stripe of abused simulacra, leading through the gates of Malkoya towards the tall spire that dominated the centre of the city. They moved as quickly as the pounding tread of Lhorke’s ironform, the First exerting a calming influence upon the gathered legionaries as they followed the Legion hero.

Still carrying the banner of the Unbroken, Astakos skidded to a halt as he saw a World Eater perched atop a heap of slain Ghennans. His skull was bright red, still bleeding from the freshly hammered Nails. Mago could hear the tearing of flesh, and the snapping of the legionary’s jaws as he consumed the dead.

Astakos moved towards the crouching warrior. ‘Brother, are you insane?’ He reached towards the World Eater. The warrior spun, his face caked with amber blood, and leapt at Astakos with a scream. A scream that died as his head and upper torso vanished in a beam of blinding energy.

Mago lowered his serpenta. ‘They aren’t our brothers any more.’ The centurion turned to his assembled brothers. ‘Remember that what we do here, we do for the Legion. For a future free from this…’ He pointed his axe at the dead World Eater. ‘This madness.’

Lhorke clenched his claws, cycling shells into his palm-mounted bolters. ‘Agreed. We must stop this insanity, before it consumes us all.’

By the time they reached the tower, it was already ablaze. Mago watched his primarch lead Khârn and the others with the Nails out from it, leaving nothing but ruin in their wake. He knew that as the tower burned, his hopes for discovering a way to cure the Nails burned with it.

‘No choice now,’ said Kauragar. ‘If we cannot remove the Nails from them, then it falls to our blades to stop them.’

‘No matter the cost.’ Mago and his brethren stopped a few paces from the primarch.

Two lines of World Eaters stood across from one another, their armour lit orange and black by the flames consuming Malkoya in the night. Those with the Nails paced and snarled, frothing at the lips as they glared at Mago’s force. The Unbroken looked upon the primarch and those who had followed in his path, their eyes stained with grief.

‘Mago,’ said Khârn. He levelled his axe at his brother.

‘My primarch,’ bellowed Mago. ‘In the name of the Twelfth Legion, and the Emperor of Mankind, I demand that you submit yourself to our custody, and travel with us to Terra to stand judgement for the crime of the Butcher’s Nails.’

Angron laughed, a bitter sneering laugh. ‘Crime.’ He spat onto the ground. ‘You sow a rebellion and accuse me of crime? Savour the taste of the air, centurion, on the last night of your life, before I rip you limb from limb.’

‘Khârn.’ Mago looked to his brother, who still regarded him down the blade of his axe.

‘Father!’ Tethys pushed his way to Mago’s side.

‘*You*.’ Angron’s face twisted in a pained sneer at the Lexicanum’s presence.

‘Yes, father.’ Tethys nodded wearily. ‘Me.’

Battle raged around the twin islands of calm that were Angron and Tethys, and Khârn and Mago. While the two centurions slowly began to circle each other, weapons in their hands, Tethys stood unarmed and silent, staring up into the sutured face of his gene-sire. Angron sneered and twitched, digging knuckles into his tightly shut eyes as the Nails sent fire into his blood from the psyker’s nearness.

Those who had taken the Butcher’s Nails leapt forward, laughing and screaming as they swung their axes and swords. Brother fought brother, not in the fraternal remove of the duelling pits, but on a battlefield, and to the death. Warriors who had bled side by side across countless campaigns now turned to fratricide, one side fighting to drag the Legion into a blood-soaked future, the other to keep it anchored in a near-forgotten past.

Astakos crashed into the fray, wielding the standard of the Unbroken like a spear. Four of his former kin leapt upon him, laying into his body with their axes and not ceasing until one of them, his face a screaming crimson mask, held the veteran’s severed head high for all to see.

Tics ruined the calm that had once defined Khârn’s features, his lips shaking as they peeled back from his teeth. ‘*Hnng*, no Nails. They would have helped you here, brother.’

‘And how is that?’ asked Mago. ‘By blinding me to the madness I am wreaking? To the brotherhood I am leading into ruin?’

‘You think you can defy him and expect to walk away?’ The chains binding Khârn’s weapons to his arms rattled with tremors. ‘That there will be no price to be paid?’

Khârn swung an axe back at the burning tower. ‘Genetic disorders ravaged their population, Mago. They were weak. And unless they adapted, unless they embraced a radical, fundamental change in what they were, they would die, reduced to a footnote in someone else’s history.’

‘Better to fade away,’ said Mago soberly, ‘than to become what they became.’

‘No.’ Khârn’s Nails clattered as he shook his head. ‘No fading away for us. I won’t twist black again. *Red twists*, Mago. The Nails mean victory, triumph, domination. Our triumph ropes will be as red as the blood we spill, unbroken red. No more shame, no more defeat. We won’t ever falter, and nothing will stop us. We will finally reach our full potential as the greatest warriors to ever sail the stars.’

‘Is that what you believe the Nails have made you?’ Mago stepped closer. ‘The ultimate warrior? Because that is not what I see. I see broken things, ruled by rage, lost to reason as they murder their own kin. As they *eat their flesh*. I see a monster. And you would have that monster be recreated, twenty thousand times? You would have the legacy of our Legion destroyed, its memory reduced to one of savagery and mindless fury?’

‘Victory,’ growled Khârn. ‘The Nails will bring us victory. Then he will see us, brother. Then he will accept his sons.’

‘You are a fool to think he is capable of that.’ Mago shook his head. ‘Perhaps once he might have been, before the Nucerians mutilated his mind and stole his peace, but not now. The thing that leads us is no father. There is only one way he can ever be that to us, the commander we swear to, the primarch we need. It is not too late. We can use the lore of this place, everything that Gahlan has uncovered, to take the Nails out of Angron, and out of you. The Twelfth has been brought to the precipice, but it can still be spared the fall.’

‘Fall.’ Khârn spat the word. ‘Ascension. We are casting off what has held us back from Angron’s heights. We will be true warriors like him, without care for anything but conquest and blood!’

‘That is not who we are,’ Mago snapped. ‘That is who *he* is, and that does not mean it is what we have to become.’

‘That is exactly what we must become. There was never any choice, Mago.’ Khârn drew in a deep, wet breath. ‘What do you want me to tell your men?’

Mago stiffened. ‘You won’t tell them anything. Because when this is done, I will still be leading them.’

‘No.’ A trickle of bloody spittle trailed from Khârn’s chin. ‘No, you have to die here, for the words you have spoken. For what you have done.’

Mago stepped closer, forcing his brother to look him in the eye.

‘It’s enough.’ Mago brought his head against Khârn’s, and impossibly he held his axe in check. ‘We can still save the Legion, Khârn. We can find another way than *this*.’

Something shone in Khârn’s eyes. Reason, or at least understanding, dawned there for an instant. It was gone just as quickly.

‘There is no other way.’

Mago’s expression turned to stone as Khârn shoved him away. His weapons now felt heavy in his hands.

‘Then come, Eater of Worlds,’ said the Unbroken centurion to his brother, ‘and match words with deeds.’

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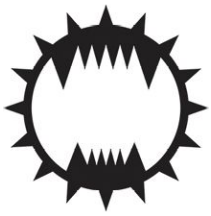

# TWENTY-SIX

As Khârn, Mago and the Legion tore themselves apart around them, Tethys drew close to his primarch, hands spread wide.

‘Father, please,’ he begged. ‘I know you felt my mind within yours, within the memories of your life. I know who you are.’

Tethys reached out to his father’s mind and bridged it to his own. He plunged through its tortured depths, hauling out the image of him, bursting loose from the caves that imprisoned the Desh’ean gladiators with his brothers and sisters at his back. The two watched within their minds as Angron led the revolt, striking back against the high-riders that had put them in bondage and made cruel sport of their lives for their own amusement. With makeshift weapons and even their own chains they charged into their gaolers, butchering them with all of the fury and skill they had been forced to learn to survive on the hot dust.

Then Tethys was on the ground, the air driven from his lungs, with Angron pounced atop him.

‘And then I saw them,’ Angron hissed. ‘I finally saw them. No walls, no maggot’s eyes, nothing more to hide behind. I saw the high-riders that for my entire life I had built into gods. I expected gods, but all I found were men. Weak, stick-thin things that reeked of fear and piss, mewling and begging that I suddenly cease in doing what I had done every hour I was alive, to stop being what they had made me into. A butcher. A killer. Those weaklings did this to me.’

Angron swung a backhand, wrenching Tethys’ head violently to one side, before reaching up to claw at his Nails. ‘They did this to me! I killed, and I killed and I killed and I killed, and I swore I would not stop until every one of them was dead. Your father isn’t here. Angron died that day, surrounded by his bonded kin. He never left Nuceria.’

He gripped the Librarian by his shoulders, lifting him off the ground and slamming him back down again and again. He looked down and saw Tethys, his face a broken bleeding mask, staring up at him, doing nothing to resist.

The look on the World Eater’s face pained Angron, not from his sixth sense, but because he could not tell what filled Tethys’ eyes. Was it dread?

Or pity?

For a moment Angron’s rage ebbed. ‘This thing in me. He could see it. My brothers, my sisters, they all saw it too.’

‘I saw it,’ whispered Tethys, the low rasp of collapsed lungs.

‘It’s gone now.’ Angron shook his head in a scrape of cables, as though he could rid himself of the thought like a louse. With a snarling bark he threw a volley of punches at the ground, digging a crater on either side of Tethys’ head. ‘They took it. Drove it out of me with everything else. There’s nothing left in me but iron and smoke. No other sound but the song of the Nails.’

‘I don’t… believe that,’ Tethys whispered. ‘We can help you, the Emperor can help you.’

‘No!’ Angron snarled. He struck Tethys, and the Librarian went limp as a doll. ‘He can keep His grand society, and carry it with Him all the way to the grave. He has taken more than He could ever give, and soon all of this will come crashing down.’

He took Tethys’ head in his hands and dashed it against the ground. ‘What will be left?’ He smashed it down again, feeling the skull crack in his fists. ‘Nothing, exactly what we deserve. The others hold themselves up as my

betters, and I will take joy in watching them fall. But I will do my part, just as they demand of me. Simple, furious Angron.’

He dropped Tethys to the dust, leaning down to whisper in his son’s ear. He spoke, even though Tethys had been dead for some time.

‘I will go between the stars, and spill blood, and take skulls, and I will leave the Emperor exactly what He left for me. Nothing but a graveyard, an endless field of bones, stabbing out from salted earth.’

Mago wasn’t fighting his brother. The brother he knew was dead, and the creature that had replaced him fought unlike anything he had seen. His brothers fell around him, no match for the Nails. They were too much.

The axe flew from his hands. Blows split his flesh and clubbed him to the ground. He raised his head, looked out through blood-stained eyes. He watched his kin butcher each other, their cherished brotherhood devolving into frothing madness. He watched Lhorke’s massive form wading through the hacking blades, the fires of Malkoya glinting from him as their last hope to prevent the Nails bled away to nothing.

Mago tried to push himself up, but crashed back to the ground. He strained to stare up at Khârn, no longer seeing the brother he had sworn to give his life for. Only a butcher.

‘This road will kill us all,’ Mago wheezed. ‘Everything we are – the brotherhood, the nobility – all of it will be erased. History will never know what we once were, only what you would have us become. A horde of marauding berserkers, driven by nothing save the impulse to spill blood. Reavers and murderers, not warriors. How long do you think you can live as monsters before you force the Emperor to act? How long before the Eaters of Worlds join the others, the forgotten and the condemned?’

Khârn said nothing, only snuffing breath through bleeding lips.

Mago felt strong hands haul him roughly to his knees. He looked up through the eye that could still see, and saw the face of Orontes glaring down at him, his skull riven with the accursed implants that would destroy the Legion. The eyes of his First Axe, his champion of a thousand battles, his friend, were gone, replaced by bulging reddened orbs that saw nothing but blood.

‘You will fail,’ hissed Mago through clenched teeth. ‘Only ruin will follow you, and history will vindicate me.’

Khârn looked down, his eyes never leaving Mago’s as he raised his axe.

‘No, brother, it won’t. Because you will not be there to write it.’

In a scream of blurring teeth, the axe fell.

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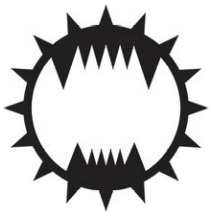

# TWENTY-SEVEN

The battle was over before it had begun. As Angron stood up from Tethys' corpse and Khârn's axe fell, the will to fight drained from the rebellious legionaries. They had dared to stop the will of their primarch, and they had failed. Now they had to face the consequences of that choice.

'So,' Angron seethed through clenched teeth. He tossed a severed head at the defeated World Eaters' feet, rolling in the dust until it stopped against one of Lhorke's hydraulic foot claws. None needed to look down to see whose it was.

'Does this one speak for you still?' he hissed, placing his sons under the full weight of his wilting yellowed glare.

Without a single word passing between them, the warriors sank to one knee, heads lowered in submission. Even Lhorke dipped the helm of his massive ironform. Those dead who had rebelled would remain where they fell, their armour dese-crated and stripped of all insignia, their gene-seed left to rot, their names and deeds stricken from the Legion's rolls of honour.

The die had been cast, and the future was now undisputed. The path of the XII would be that of the Butcher's Nails, and nothing else.

Angron eyed each of the World Eaters before him. Despite the disdain that had filled him since his capture, he knew every one of them by name and reputation. While the past was a pained haze, recent memory was one of the few vestiges of what Angron had once been that remained to him, and as he stood there, his back baking with the flames of a burning civilisation, Angron remembered the faces of the sons that had stood against him.

A reckoning would come, perhaps not now, or in a year, or ten, but it would come. Betrayal was a sin Angron could never forgive, and in time each one of them would feel the full weight of his judgement.

It took eight days to implant the Butcher's Nails into the rest of the Legion within the fleet above Ghenna. Eight days of an unceasing procession of World Eaters submitting to being recast in Angron's image. Eight days to decide the future of the XII Legion, and the path they would follow. By the end of the eighth day, every World Eater had been given the Nails, save the few remaining blue-armoured Librarians, held back in the shadows by Vorias where they would not torment their father and now their brethren.

Once the implantation was complete, Angron led his new sons back down onto Ghenna. In one massed horde they rampaged across its surface, doing to the rest of the planet what Khârn and the first implanted had done to Malkoya. They rendered an unspeakable carnage, not stopping until every structure and monument was levelled, and every trace of life exterminated.

Finally, the primarch brought his Legion back to Malkoya, that shining metropolis, and razed it to the ground. For hours the World Eaters dwelt there, revelling in the flames. By the time the fires died down across Ghenna and their ashes had cooled, there was nothing left to suggest there had ever been anything there beyond an ancient civilisation, long since dead.

The fires consuming Malkoya, though, were still raging when word reached Angron from the fleet in orbit.

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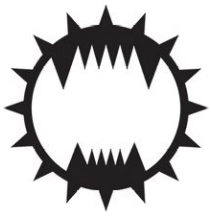

# TWENTY-EIGHT

On the bridge of the *Conqueror*, three hundred souls moved in ordered anarchy as they orchestrated the XII Legion flagship and the fleet of warships that surrounded it. While overall command was held by Admiral Gebron, holding court upon an elevated central dais, control of the dizzying array of systems and concerns involved with a Legiones Astartes warfleet was divided between various captains and sub-commanders, who oversaw everything from the heat distribution of the *Conqueror*'s reactor heart to the reloading of her massive weapons batteries.

The duty of controlling the flagship's long range auspex fell to Lieutenant Vincens Karafee. Ever since his birth and aristocratic upbringing, atop the spires of Hive Primus on the lavish world of Plytonis, Vincens had never been given cause to have a low opinion of himself. It was by such confidence, and his pedigree, that he had risen to a command position aboard the *Conqueror*, his eye never straying long from the brass throne at the centre of the bridge he planned to occupy one day.

The current campaign bored him. The enemy had no fleet or defence network for the *Conqueror* to rip apart with her guns, and none of the shipmasters had mustered the courage to chance an orbital bombardment after Brujo. That left Vincens Karafee with nothing to do but pace his station dugout, checking over the cadre of servitors monitoring the edge of the system for auspex disturbances.

‘Proximity alarm,’ droned one of Karafee’s charges, as a ream of data vellum began to issue from the enmeshed mouth of an adjoining servitor. ‘Warp translation. Warp translation. Warp translation. Warp transla–’

Karafee depressed a rune on the back of the servitor’s head, ceasing its verbal functions. Leaning forward, Vincens pulled one corner of the ream of printing tactical data, tearing along the perforations against the second servitor’s front teeth. He examined the vellum, his eyes darting quickly over the tiny lines of text freshly inked onto it. After reaching the bottom, he shot his subordinate a sharp glance.

‘You,’ said Vincens, laying a gloved hand on the man. ‘Check this again.’

‘But sir,’ the crewman answered, gesturing towards the screen. ‘It’s already been–’

Vincens’ grip tightened, fingers digging into the meat of the man’s shoulder. ‘Check it *again*.’

Both of them held for a moment, waiting as translation cyphers repeated, rewriting the blunt, knotwork runes that appeared onscreen into something legible. The process completed and Vincens straightened, paling, the finest beads of sweat breaking across his brow.

The lieutenant’s boots clanged softly against the deck as he hurried towards the command dais. Admiral Gebron was standing in front of the immense brass throne at its centre, conferring with the hololithic projections of his captains and senior officers serving aboard the other ships. Vincens stopped a respectful distance from the dais before taking a step closer, listening in to the discussion between the shipmasters.

‘You tell that spire-born princess that she is to keep her vessel in formation as ordered,’ Gebron snapped. ‘I don’t give a damn who her father is.’

Vincens took another step towards the dais, then another, until the admiral took notice of him with a scowl.

‘What is it, Lieutenant Karafee?’

‘My lord,’ said Vincens, his pallor increasing as he cleared his throat. ‘There has been a massive warp translation at the edge of the system.

Auspex coding has returned, been verified and confirmed.’

‘Well spit it out then,’ Gebron demanded. ‘Who is it?’

Before Vincens could answer, the projections of three of the shipmasters extinguished. Gebron looked up, watching the others engage in hurried conference with crew members on their own ships, before also cutting the link. The admiral looked down at the lieutenant, locking Vincens beneath his steel gaze.

‘Who?’

‘My lord,’ replied Karafee. ‘The lead vessel has been confirmed as the *Hrafnkel*, with an entire fleet at her back. Primarch Russ and his Wolves are here.’

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# EPILOGUE

## THE BUTCHER’S REFLECTION

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*‘The only thing that burns in Hell is the part of you that won’t let go of life: your memories, your attachments. They burn them all away. But they’re not punishing you. They’re freeing your soul. So, if you’re frightened of dying and… you’re holding on, you’ll see devils tearing your life away. But if you’ve made your peace, then the devils are really angels, freeing you from the earth.’*

– Fragment recovered from a treatise on Pre-Unification religious mysticism, author unknown

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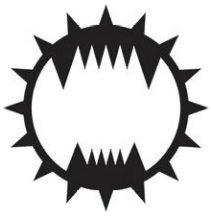

I stalk along shattered boulevards as the world around me burns. Flames paint the sky in a liar’s dawn, staining everything crimson to mimic the devastation. Violated flesh adorns the ruins of the monolithic city, bloodshed in such obscene quantities that I can taste the metal upon the air.

It makes my hearts sing.

I leap into the blood-streaked night on a column of fire, my jump pack screaming ribbons of smoke and dirty light. I look down, surveying the carnage we have wrought, massacre and butchery all for its own sake alone. My brethren and I fell from orbit hours before, our Dreadclaw unleashing obscene children the colour of angry blood onto the streets of the shrine world capital. The city died quickly, the mortal legions of man’s decaying Imperium as ever unable to match our blades. For we are the Eaters of Worlds, and we revel in the ecstasy annihilation brings.

I cannot see my brothers amongst the ruins, stalking the last survivors just as I am, but no matter. The farther apart we are, the less likely we are to

vent our bloodlust upon each other. Our Legion is long dead, and bonds of brotherhood ring more hollow each day, a pathetic competition to the ache to spill blood.

The streets are carpeted with orphaned limbs and savaged bodies. Most are cold, some still yielding their final, desperate heat to the wind. I feel the itch bloom behind my eyes as I gaze upon them. The sensations of atrocity have roused the machine living within my skull. Capering its influence through my veins, the Nails almost speak, purring such sweet lies as they promise satisfaction to a bloodlust I know will never be slaked.

…*hunger,* I hear it whisper to me, *prey.*…

I feel the movement before I see it.

I hurtle towards the ground, clawed boots birthing spiderweb cracks through the rockcrete. The first mortal I reach howls as my pistol boils it alive until it is but ashen bone. Another, likely a priest by its haughty robes, convulses under my attentions as I turn it inside out with the teeth of my axe. There is a wet sackcloth tearing sound of sinew separating from bone. I hold the twitching creature high as its veins empty themselves. Blood splashes my helm, and I tear it loose to drink until it fills my mouth and I am nearly overcome.

The rage dwelling within me drinks just as deeply as I shower in the blood, and the Nails send tremors of pleasure through me in gratitude.

‘Blood… for the Blood God…’ I gasp in prayer as hot lifeblood runs down my body, covering pale worms of scar tissue and the harsh, brutal features that define us, Angron’s bastard sons. The desanguinated remains are thrown from my grip, dashed against the broken stones of the road.

Some of the mortals beg, as I add them to my butcher’s tally. What could they possibly think they could offer me? I wonder. Do they even understand who is killing them?

*No,* sing the Nails. *They only see strength and power and rage, and scatter like vermin to escape the oblivion we bring. Craven, to their last fevered breath. Their Imperium was birthed in blood and flame. Is it not justice for it to die the same way?*

I succumb to the implant’s control for a time, tumbling into a rapturous fever of wrath. Individuals do not register as my axe rends flesh and my pistol burns it away. All the worth these mortals could ever offer me thrums within their tiny, fearful hearts. Their blood is so thin, so utterly permeated by weakness, it is almost not worth drinking.

I gorge upon it all the same.

I scream as I hunt another mortal, loping on all fours like a beast in pursuit. I have lost my jump pack, my helm hanging by a chain from my belt and dragging behind me in the street. Barefaced, my lunatic grin is clogged with the viscera of my prey's companions. It attempts to flee, but stumbles, sprawling at the foot of a statue in the centre of a square. As I gather the mortal up, ready again to feast, my eye falls upon the statue, and the figure it means to represent.

Hewn from gleaming obsidian veined with gold, a mighty Space Marine stands triumphant over a vanquished ork chieftain. The sigils on the armour have been altered, chipped away by time and changed. But there is truth here I recognise, the shield and spear he carries, his cloak. And the harsh, brutal features. The ones that define Angron's sons.

The statue is of someone that I used to know. A brother who I–

The Nails stab at my mind, punishing my introspection, but they cannot stop it fully. Drowned beneath ten millennia of blood and atrocity, a memory surfaces in a moment of clarity so rare it is laughable in its tragedy. We have been here before, this champion and I, fighting in the crusade of the False Emperor. Our armour had been ivory and cobalt then, where now mine is stained crimson and flawed bronze. We were Eaters of Worlds, but we had not always been so. The memories bring pain, and after one hundred centuries in hell, I have forgotten so much.

We had found our father, Angron. It was here, on this world, where we drank from his well of madness, chaining our fate to the whims of a lunatic god. The figure standing over me is as alien now as the things we once slaughtered here, ten thousand years in the past. The Nails sting me with pain for my diversion, flaying the inner workings of my mind with a lash of acid fire. It is so much easier to murder than to think, to brutalise than to remember.

*Clawing up a mountain, desperate to reach the pinnacle – a father's acknowledgement, if never respect – only to be dashed down its slopes again and again.*

*Mutilating ourselves, twisted into broken savages by the Nails.*

*Betraying everything, only to trade one uncaring master for another. Never free.*

*Always a slave.*

I do not realise I have crushed my victim's skull within my grip. I ignore the glistening ribbons of flesh drooling between my fingers like the pulp from a rotten fruit. Trembling, I unclench my fist, and the twitching corpse topples into the ash. I hear nothing beyond the twin thunder of my hearts.

We did not fight orks here. Do they fear to tell themselves of the real enemy, of the false men we slaughtered here? Did the rotting Imperium tell their people *any* truth of us? Do the histories they have manufactured tell a single true thing about the birth of their realm and the warriors who bled it into being?

*Kill*, the Nails hiss. I obey.

Fury tears free from me in a bestial roar. I charge, propelled by rage as I crash into the statue. With a sound like a gunshot, the base snaps and it ploughs into the street with me atop it.

A rare moment of restraint keeps me from using the axe, and I drop it to hang from its chain as I smash into the effigy with my fists. I roar and rage until my dead brother's likeness is reduced to a mound of gritty black dust, lifted upon the wind. The breeze turns and covers me in the grit, anchored by the blood that coats me like a second skin. I reel and writhe about, clawing at myself to tear it away. Yet it persists, as if animated by some vindictive revenant of my past. My baying ceases when I hear hurried footsteps nearby.

My head snaps up, icy calm reasserted by the promise of fresh prey.

*Blood*, sing the honeyed whispers of the Butcher's Nails behind my eyes. *Blood will wash the dust away. Blood will wash the past away…*

I rise, stumbling back from the wreckage of a past life. I hear the vox in my collar trill, and the faint echoes from within the helm lying in the street behind me.

'*Khârn…*' The name barely reaches my ears, anchoring me back in reality for a moment. For that moment, the Nails withdraw a fraction, relenting just enough for me to remember who I am.

'*Khârn*,' my helm repeats, '*come to us. We found more*.'

The promise of more blood sets my own ablaze. I stoop, gathering up my helm and securing it in place. Through emerald eyes I watch my own bleeding hands as I take up the only legacy my father left for his children. *Gorechild* screams in my fists, aching to resume the slaughter just as much as I do.

'B-blood,' I whisper, my eyes like feral calderas as I tear off into the

streets to hunt again.

‘Blood… for the Blood God!’

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ian St. Martin** is the author of the Horus Heresy: Primarchs audio drama *Konrad Curze: A Lesson in Darkness*. He has also written the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Of Honour and Iron*, *Lucius: The Faultless Blade* and *Deathwatch: Kryptman's War*, along with the novella *Steel Daemon* and several short stories. He lives and works in Washington DC, caring for his cat and reading anything within reach.

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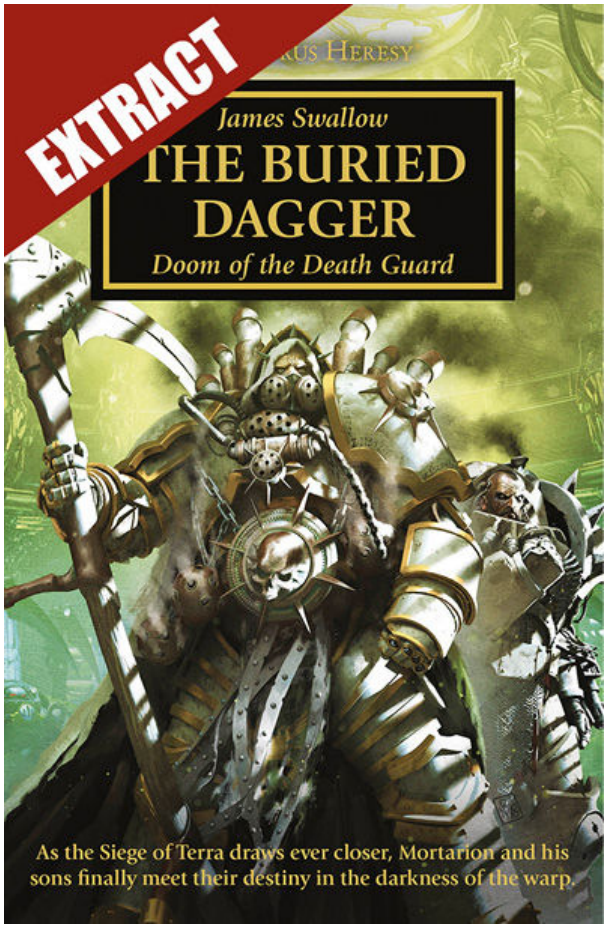
**An extract from *The Buried Dagger*.**


EXTRACT
James Swallow
THE BURIED DAGGER
Doom of the Death Guard
As the Siege of Terra draws ever closer, Mortarion and his sons finally meet their destiny in the darkness of the warp.

*OceanofPDF.com*

The Reaper of Men had grown weary of the screaming.

The cries from a million throats, the ceaseless cacophony of it, now fatigued him. He had long since become jaded with the pleas of those he killed, be they babbling streams of words as the doomed begged for pity, the foolish and furious curses of the fatally enraged or the endless, irritating wail of those who wept brokenly.

There was, at least, a small mercy to be had here on the surface of Ynyx. The monstrously poisonous atmosphere of the manufactory planet meant that every soul who toiled upon the world had no mouth with which to cry out. From the instant of their birth, the machines of the magos biologis sealed shut the apertures upon the faces of the human populace, organo-printing protective membrane masks over lips and nostrils. The workers were implanted with grilles and nutrient intakes, along with countless chem shunts and protective grafts, these enhancements and alterations sufficient to make them immune to the toxic fog that belched continuously from the core of the mineral-rich world. The people of Ynyx could only communicate via vox transmission, their voices muted in all other senses, and so it was that the Reaper of Men could walk in silence among them if he simply tuned them out.

The only sound was the rumble of the planet's breath, forcing its way up through geothermal vents in the black landscape all around him, that and the steady crunch of brittle glass beneath his heavy plasteel boots. Scattered all over the battlefield, more numerous than the ragged remnants of dead bodies from the pre-invasion shelling, were endless numbers of empty cylindrical vials. Drug ampoules by the thousand, discarded by the Ynyxian defenders. Whatever effect they had brought – blissful oblivion, docility or merely resistance against the swirling churn of atmospheric contaminants –

it counted for nothing. This world's populace would be dead by nightfall, and it would not matter.

The cold ember of his familiar, obdurate resentment pushed him forward, one heavy and echoing step after the other, over the oily ebon sand towards the great citadel that was his objective. At the edges of his supremely genhanced vision, the Reaper of Men was aware of his praetorians marching in lockstep with him, each at a distance of seven by seven paces, all carrying their weapons across their chests in a blank mirror of his own aspect.

Held at rest against one of his shoulders was a skeletal scythe that was sooty with dried blood and tainted fluids. His other gauntleted hand wandered often to the heavy, drum-like shape of a unique, master-crafted energy gun hanging at his hip. Like the warrior himself, everything about his weapons was beyond human scale, built for the grasp of giants and demigods. Even his chosen guard, huge as they were, could not match his scale. Only two beings had ever stood taller than the Reaper of Men; the first had died at the hands of the second. *As to the fate of the second…*

In time, that question would be answered. The old, bitter ember stirred anew at the thought, but the giant stifled it before it could grow. Such things were a distraction. His mind was supposed to be here, at the march through Ynyx's polluted dusk, not picking at this deep-rooted, forever unhealed wound. There would be time enough to nurse his lingering hate in the days ahead.

He cast a glance over his shoulder plates. Out past his hooded bodyguards, marching in lines behind them, came the body of his war band. Battle-captains and commanders, the striding forms of Dreadnoughts and Terminators, and rank after rank of legionaries in grimy, slate-coloured armour. He advanced with them at his heels, for they would never dare to march into battle without him at their head, even on as pitiful a killing ground as this one.

His Legion. His Death Guard. His unbroken blades.

They were all that occupied him now. His sons were the only thing he saw clearly, as the haze of the great insurrection led by his brother seemed to coil ever thicker around every deed, every thought in mind of the Reaper of Men. With his warriors, in battle, he came closest to *clarity* – or something like it.

He marched on, into the twilight and towards the great shadow cast by the

citadel. The tallest structure for kilometres in every direction, it protruded from a great axial canyon that ringed the upper hemisphere of Ynyx. Thousands of such depthless chasms fractured the planet's surface, vanishing into hellish pits kilometres deep where toxic smoke exhaled from the roiling core. The ashen matter vomited up from below was the source of the world's fortune, laden with rare and precious heavy metallic elements that the manufactora of the Imperium sucked in and reprocessed. The refinery engines – lumbering city-sized arachnids of tarnished brass and grey iron – sat atop the richest of the vents for decades at a time, draining them dry before moving on to fresh pastures.

Few places on Ynyx had any permanence except the great citadel, built on the ancient site of the planet's first colony landing. Formed of sapphire-dark stone dragged up from the abyssal depths, it was both palace and monument. The blocky, brutalist architecture of its design was as stark as a grave marker, its mere presence acting as a statement to the universe beyond. *We have built in this unliveable place and ripped out the riches at its heart*, said the citadel. *We have done this in the name of the Emperor and Terra.*

The Reaper of Men had his orders to cast it down, of course, but Mortarion would do so more because he *wanted* to. Because to do so would be to destroy one more possession belonging to his absent father, and in the act, find a few grains of satisfaction.

Movement at the edge of his helm's auto-senses brought the primarch of the XIV Legion back to the moment, and he looked in the direction of the alert icon. Curious, he stepped off the line and wandered towards an impact crater blasted into the dense, clumped basalt sand. Behind him, he heard the clatter of a thousand troops halting, but he paid it no mind.

In the crater there were three humans who against all odds were still alive. Ynyxians, and not soldiers but civilians. Their physical alterations meant it was difficult for Mortarion to tell which of the genders they fell into or how old they were. Each wore the hood and eye-mask typical of their people, the feed tubules of their sealed mouths coiled in bunches against spoiled nutri-feed packs they carried around their necks.

They were so very afraid of him. He imagined that he could taste the odour of it in the ashen air. Mortarion had deliberately left his breath filters open wide so that he could drink in the noxious atmosphere of the spoiled world, and now he took in a great gale of it, feeling the subtle burn of the

pollutants as they attempted to scar his mighty lungs. Unprotected, the weak bodily tissues of these humans would have melted to slurry before they could fully inhale, but for the Reaper of Men, the lethal air of Ynyx was no distraction.

He watched them, looking through the lenses of his helm, searching their faces for an understanding that would never emerge. It was a fruitless endeavour; these pitiful creatures were no different from the others. No matter how many he found on whatever planets, none of them could see past the fear. That same terror, buoyed up by the same hate simmering away just below it. They would never know him. They could not.

In those desperate, beseeching faces, he saw something familiar – the stirrings of a memory recalled by similarity. The Reaper of Men quickly smothered the moment, irritated by the conceit of it.

Mortarion moved, letting the action happen of its own accord. His free hand drew the heavy energy weapon from its holster, and the device reacted, powering up the moment its gene-lock registered his touch. The Lantern, as the gun had been named, turned towards the figures cowering in the pit. They reacted, silently raising their hands in a gesture of warding. If they were screaming, he did not hear it.

A brief pulse of searing white light erased them from existence, their bodies becoming a faint trace of vapour in the moment of discharge. The Lantern's shrieking power atomised the survivors and turned the surface layer of the crater into a bowl of fused fulgurite. He turned and marched away, leaving the newly formed glass crackling and hissing as it cooled.

What he had done for them was a mercy, a quick death. He knew all the kinds of dying, and to end by the Lantern's flame was a better way than many. Mortarion had given them a gift.

He forgot the humans as he marched on, the image of them slipping away as his thoughts returned to more martial matters. The primarch allowed his gaze to rise along the line of the darkened, windowless citadel, and the questions that had been nagging at him since the Death Guard arrived on Ynyx returned.

*Why did Horus send me here?*

Mortarion drew in another deep, tainted breath. There was little of tactical value to the manufactory world and the storehouse moons that orbited it, and less still to the other spheres of rock that circled the watery white light of Ynyx's sun. The Death Guard had found the chem-loaded combat helots

who defended the planet to be a perfunctory and unchallenging foe, rolling over their positions with the Legion's signature tactic of inexorable advance. Tearing this planet from the control of the Imperium and denying it to the Emperor was a task that could have been accomplished by a handful of battle cruisers and lesser companies. The vast force and numbers that the Warmaster had bid Mortarion to bring to Ynyx was nothing short of overkill.

It vexed the Reaper of Men to be ignorant of Horus' true reasoning, and in the void where answers ran out, he was wont to fill the gap with suspicion.

Mortarion knew of Horus' dalliances with the beings of the warp, the things that called themselves the Ruinous Powers. These monstrous intelligences craved gifts of death and bloodletting, and while Mortarion did not speak openly of it, he was aware that among his rebellious brothers there were some who were all too eager to appease them. Worlds burned in mass sacrifices, and arcane horrors were committed as if such acts could court the favour of these… *things*.

He wondered, had Horus sent the Death Guard to exterminate the population of Ynyx as part of such a bargain?

*Am I simply his tool in this?*

Behind his breath mask, Mortarion's pallid lips twisted in a grimace. Once, it would have been nigh-impossible for the primarch to think ill of Horus Lupercal. Now, his corrosive distrust had eaten away at that certainty. And perhaps that was fated. Over countless years and hard-won, bitter experience, the Reaper of Men had learned that in the end, he could only completely trust his own counsel.

The more he dwelt on the possibility, the more it seemed to grow to fit the facts. Mortarion himself had dared to peer into the lore of these warp-beings, the creatures that some named *daemons*.

In the skies above the ruins of glorious Terathalion, he had looked into the face of such a monster for the first time, named it and interrogated it, for what little that had been worth. That had been the turning point, he reflected, the moment when he could no longer dismiss these aberrations out of hand.

The primarch's long-dead foster father – the corrupted and callous being who had named him, the one he thought of when that notion came to mind – had taught him many lessons as he grew to adulthood, not least of which was the value of knowledge as well as endurance.

*If you know the truth of something, then you can destroy it*, his foster father had said. *And that is all you need to hold true power.*

Mortarion was learning a new truth, page by page, step by step, scroll by scroll. The witchery and sorcerous cankers he hated so much were widespread in this new and changed war, employed openly by Horus, that arrogant braggart Magnus and the rest of them. He detested the psykers and the warp-things with such an inchoate fury that it was impossible for him to find words to encompass the emotion, and he loathed his brother primarchs for lowering themselves to have congress with such creatures.

But Mortarion was a child of blighted Barbarus, and no sons and daughters of that death world lived long enough to walk erect if they were not pragmatists. Hate was all well and good, but it could not outdo obstinate reality. Hate alone did not make walls fall. And so, in the space between his repugnance for things tainted by the immaterium's gelid hand and his need to win the war inside his own soul, Mortarion had grudgingly found a place to accommodate these horrors.

One of them, in particular, that wore the face of an old friend.

Mortarion paused once again as he entered the remains of a rubble-strewn plaza before the citadel, and his thoughts returned to his grand shuttle, moored a few kilometres away in the blasted landing zone where the Legion's invasion force had made planetfall. The vessel, a war-barge named *Greenheart*, was a segment of his flagship that could operate as an autonomous command-and-control nexus if the mission required it. It could be parked in orbit and set to direct bombardments or pacifications, hard-landed in target zones or, as in this day's circumstances, used to light the way towards a decapitation strike.

*Greenheart* carried cannons more powerful than most ships its size, volkite tech and displacer guns that could batter cities, but Mortarion rarely used them. His thoughts held not on the potential of those devices, but on the power of the weapon chained up in a stasis-null cage on the barge's lower decks.

Even now, the primarch was uncertain that he had made the right call in bringing the caged beast with him, wondering if it would have been more prudent to leave the thing in the dungeons of his flagship, the *Endurance*.

It had *begged*, in the end. Begged him to take it along, begged Mortarion to drop it from the sky and let it eat all life it found on Ynyx, just as it had done so well during the battle for Molech.

***‘Let me serve you,’*** it said, in a grotesque parody of the warrior-son Mortarion had once known. ‘***Let me kill them for you, gene-father.’***

He refused, of course. That would have been too easy. What value would there have been to bring his Legion here, only to let the daemon with the face of Ignatius Grulgor do the deed for them?

Was that part of the plan? A manoeuvre to push Mortarion closer to the path laid out by the Ruinous Powers?

The creature, twice dead and resurrected by his primarch’s own hand, was a weapon unlike any the Death Guard had ever employed, even at the height of their powers in toxin warfare. Wherever it walked, life turned to blackened ruin and disease. *A tempting dagger to wield*, Mortarion told himself. *Far too tempting*.

Perhaps, when this day was done, he might abandon the daemon with Grulgor’s face on this cracked and broken world. Perhaps he might gather the papers and scrolls, every pict-slate and data crystal containing the lore of these warp-things, and pour them into the abyss of Ynyx’s deepest chasm. Be rid of the ideal of them and fight on to Terra as he was meant to.

*We could return to the purity of warfare*, he told himself. *As the inexorable, unstoppable force that makes the galaxy tremble to hear our approach.*

But even as the possibility crossed his thoughts, Mortarion knew it was already being betrayed. Pragmatism did not flinch from using the most horrific of tools, even if the abhorrence of such works was great. The ends justified the means, and there would eventually come a day when such tools were no longer needed.

Then, they would not merely be *discarded*. They would be expunged from existence.

‘My lord?’ The voice did not come over the vox-network, but was instead carried by the thick, foetid air.

The Reaper of Men turned and with a nod from his tarnished helm, his Deathshroud praetorians parted to allow a lone figure in battleplate to approach him.

The primarch’s equerry inclined his head as a wary salute and paused, eyeing the citadel tower.

‘Speak,’ rasped Mortarion.

‘The enemy appear in no rush to meet us.’ Caipha Morarg gestured towards the great obelisk. ‘Auspex readings show no visible entrances

around the lower level of the citadel, and no signs of enemy activity. I would ask, lord, how you would have us proceed.'

'You are mistaken,' he told the legionary. 'They are here. They are watching us.' As the hoarse words left his mouth, Mortarion took a step further into the empty plaza, and deliberately triggered the ambush he knew was waiting for them.

All around, the fractured flagstones and the clogged black sand ranging beyond them trembled and shook underfoot. Clawed fingers sheathed in polycarbonate burst forth like the shoots of obscene plants seeking sunlight, and human bodies shelled by carapace armour and deep-pressure mining rigs erupted from where they had been buried. The last battalions of Ynyx's defenders had willingly allowed themselves to be interred beneath the metallic sands so that they might spring this trap upon the Death Guard.

*What foolish ideal do they cling to?* Mortarion gave a grave shake of the head. *Did they actually believe I would not intuit their plans? Do they think they have a chance?*

He had no need to give the order to fire. His legionaries were already killing, the rancid air vibrating with the smacking concussion of bolter fire. At his side, Morarg used his pistol to behead a human in a mining exo-frame, blasting flesh and skull into crimson slurry through the heavy rad-plates of the machine the attacker wore like an oversuit. Spinning drills and whirling cutters buzzed and clattered as the mechanism stumbled on a few more steps, sporadic neural impulses from the dead man within still pushing it forward.

Mortarion gave it a desultory backhand blow with the flat of *Silence*'s blade, his towering scythe flashing briefly in the bleak daylight. The exo-frame cannoned away under the force of the impact, ricocheting off the high outer wall of the citadel. It sank to the flagstones in a sizzling heap, leaving inky marks on the rock.

He ignored the storm of bolter fire and clashing metal at his back and marched on, meeting nothing he considered to be resistance as he crossed the last few metres to the wall. Surrounding him, his Deathshroud wove shapes in the air as their blades cleaved any of the Ynyxian troopers who dared to stray into range. Emerald-hued lances of fire rippled from flame projectors mounted on their gauntlets, as powerful chem-munitions discharged into the mass of the enemy ambushers and melted them where they stood.

Morarg trailed at the primarch's heels, his helmet bobbing as he looked to and fro. They reached the foot of the impregnable citadel, and if there had ever been an entrance to the tower here, it had been sealed away so cleanly that the rock appeared to be carved from a single gigantic piece of obsidian.

'There is no way in…' muttered the equerry.

'Patience, Caipha,' admonished Mortarion, reaching up to detach a handful of globe-like censers from a bandolier that hung across the brass-and-steel expanse of his chest-plate. Each of the orbs was drilled with thousands of holes, and within alchemical philtres and fluids of great potency nestled in permeable sacs.

Mortarion brought the cluster of globes up to the breath mask that covered the lower part of his gaunt, pallid features, and rolled them in his long fingers, stirring the volatiles within. Wisps of thin white smoke issued from the pits in their surfaces, and he inhaled them, savouring the lethal bite of the chemicals. Then, with a flick of his wrist, the Reaper of Men hurled the orbs at the wall of the citadel and watched them shatter against the stone.

The hyperacidic fluids within spattered across the black rock, instantly softening the surface into something waxy and frangible. Mortarion counted silently to seven and struck the weakened wall with the heavy pommel at the base of *Silence*'s shaft. The stone cracked like glass. He hit it again and again, until the blow had torn open a ragged gash large enough for two Dreadnoughts to walk through abreast.

'Follow,' growled Mortarion, and he advanced once more, his pace as careful and as steady as it had been during the march from the landing zone.

Morarg knew well enough to stay clear of the arc of *Silence*'s wicked reach, remaining near to his primarch but beyond the singing silver streaks of Mortarion's murderous scythe. They plunged through the mass of common troopers crammed into the main atrium of the citadel and the Reaper of Men moved among them with an almost machine-like action, cutting them down in their hundreds with each back-and-forth sweep of the mighty sickle blade.

Morarg busied himself with killing any who survived the kiss of *Silence*'s edge, but he had sparse trade. Such was Mortarion's unflinching aim and dogged advance that barely a handful of souls did not immediately die from contact with him, and those that endured the first blow did not live long. Meanwhile, the equerry and the Deathshroud mopped up whatever forces

tried to flank them from the echoing arcades along the sides of the atrium, blasting them apart against the spindly, fluted columns that held up the vaulted roof far above.

Pulses of laser fire spat down in a crimson rain from balconies and glassed-in galleries hundreds of metres overhead, drawing his attention. Morarg fired back, then barked out orders to the Death Guard line legionaries pouring in through the breach their liege lord had made. He blink-clicked target icons to the vision blocks of the squad commanders and they answered by ranging their guns up. A screaming salvo of concentrated firepower obliterated the platforms where the Ynyx las-sniper battalion was concealed, and the bodies of the sharpshooters came raining down around him to crack against the marble floor, along with shattered bricks and shards of crystalflex.

The Lantern's distinctive song keened its banshee wail, and Morarg picked his way through the dead to where Mortarion stood. The Reaper of Men used the energy weapon to burn off the thick hinges of a huge brass hatch set in a raised dais. As the metal turned molten and drooled away, the door slumped and slid back to reveal a descending passage. Searing, fume-laden air gushed out.

'We go down,' said the primarch. 'The day's work ends below.'

Morarg nodded, and turned back to the warriors behind him. 'Secure the building and terminate all remaining targets!' He paused, then turned back to Mortarion. 'My lord, do you wish to–?'

But the Reaper of Men had not waited, and was already descending. His seven Deathshroud fell into formation behind and followed. Morarg nodded to himself, then went on.

'Keep me apprised of any developments,' he said into the vox-net, knowing that his orders would be relayed to *Greenheart* and from there to the Death Guard fleet in orbit. 'Lord Mortarion wishes to conclude the battle by his own hand.'

Morarg took a moment to reload the sickle magazine in his bolter and jogged down the wide stairwell in the wake of the primarch's praetorians. He suspected his presence would not be needed in the fight to come, but he had been in this circumstance before, reduced to standing back and acting as witness to the unchained maelstrom that was Mortarion's cold wrath. If that was to be his function today, then so be it. He would take pride in the deed.

Caipha Morarg was a Pale Son, a Death Guard born of stock from the Legion’s home world of Barbarus and not, as some were, sired by tribes from Terra. For many among the brotherhood there would always be a schism, a rivalry in place between the ‘original’ warriors of the XIV Legion – the ones who had been known as the Dusk Raiders, who had come to Barbarus when the Emperor arrived there to find His lost son – and the common men whom Mortarion had uplifted from his ragged Death Guard into the Legion’s number, and in whose honour it had been renamed.

The memories of that auspicious day were hazy but they still existed in the equerry’s distant recall. He cut off the recollection, lest he lose his focus in a moment of reverie, and kept his attention on the descent.

Ahead, gunfire and screaming sounded off the curved walls of the wide stairwell as Mortarion and his personal guard dispatched all those who were too slow to flee the reach of their manreapers. Their pace did not slow as they went.

The unspeaking Deathshroud mimicked the primarch in some aspects, not just with the design of their modified Terminator armour and the war-scythes they wielded, but with their shadowed reaper’s hoods, dark cloaks and the heavy plasteel helmets that covered their faces and aped the impassive aspect of Mortarion’s own portcullis mask. The Deathshroud never uttered a word, communicating only through battle-sign or audial break codes on the rare occasions they were required to transmit a message via vox. There were always seven of them at the primarch’s hand, never straying more than seven by seven paces from his side at all times. The repeated number was said to be an auspicious one, an old belief dating back to before the seeding of human colonies on Barbarus, but it had lost its superstitious taint over the years and was now seen as a simple tactical nicety.

Morarg had never given it much thought, at least not until recent times. Some of the warriors he conversed with in the Davinite Lodges talked about the number with reverence; they spoke of the power of such symbols and how they could affect things in the real world. The equerry found these notions intriguing, but little more. He was, and always had been, a man of uncomplicated paths. The numinous and the uncanny were anathema to him, an ingrained reaction born of a taught hate for the creatures who embodied such ideas. He had lived to kill such things, back on Barbarus, back when he had been just a man. But like the tale of the numbers and

their powers, the longer Morarg lived, the more that too seemed like a story he had once been told and not something he had actually experienced.

One of the Deathshroud glanced back towards him, then away. It was difficult to tell them apart at the best of times. Morarg had no idea what faces were concealed behind those sealed masks. The Reaper of Men himself personally chose the legionaries who were granted the shroud and told no other of his selections. When one of Mortarion's praetorians fell in battle, the armour was said to consume the body within. The warrior then picked to replace the lost would himself be declared dead on the field of battle, and entered into the lists as if he had fallen to enemy action – but in reality, he would strip himself of all identity and become Deathshroud, there to carry the honour of standing at Mortarion's side, as close as any Death Guard could ever come to being considered a confidante of their liege lord.

*Would I ever be worthy of such a tribute?* Morarg entertained the thought briefly, then shook it off. He already carried a high accolade of his own. The primarch had plucked him from his posting in the Breachers and made him his factotum.

*His witness*, Morarg amended. There had never been any lore keepers or remembrancers in the Death Guard, only those like him – battle-brothers with keen memories and sharp eyes. *If I am to document all that befalls my Legion and my master, then so be it. That is as good a calling as any.*

Ahead, the stairwell widened still further to deposit them in a chamber dominated by two semicircular doors in the far wall. The sheer amount of visible opulence, from the rich carpets and thick tapestries adorning the support columns to the gilded objects and artworks in every alcove, spoke of this place as the domain of an aggrandised ruler. Morarg's trigger finger twitched. He saw the lavish, self-indulgent affluence of it all and immediately wanted to destroy it.

Pillars of toxin-laced steam and damp, oppressive heat climbed through ventilation grilles in the floor, and a sullen orange illumination channelled up along vast light traps gave everything an infernal glow. Morarg heard a strange echo behind the march of his boots and tensed. The chamber had the feel of an arena, despite all attempts to make it seem otherwise.

The Deathshroud appeared to sense the same portent, and they moved into a protective formation around Mortarion's flanks. Only the Reaper of Men was unmoved by the air of ready threat in the chamber. He gave *Silence* a shake, flicking off the blood of those it had cut down, and kneaded the haft.

Morarg heard the clacking of great metal claws on the marble then, a scraping and clashing noise like a hundred swords being dragged across the tiles. His auto-senses picked out two hulking forms as they burst through searing walls of steam, man-shaped things that stormed across the floor towards Mortarion, each bearing an orchard of blades and buzzing beam emitters where they should have had arms. A jangling disharmony of bell tones sounded from thousands of rattling injector ampoules jammed into the bare flesh of their torsos and thighs. The hulking forms were some kind of altered human, ogre-like with their chemically forced gigantism. It struck the Death Guard that they were what someone inexpert might have created had they tried to duplicate a warrior of the Legiones Astartes. Twinned freaks powered by cocktails of metatropic drugs, set loose to act as gate guardians for whoever waited in the chamber beyond this one.

The first strike came in a flash of quick moves. Mortarion raised a hand, a simple order to the Deathshroud to stand back and not intervene, and then with a pivot so quick that Morarg barely registered it happening, the Reaper of Men spun *Silence* around to invert the great scythe and kiss the head of the blade across the marble floor. White sparks flew where the scythe touched the ground, and the primarch thundered forward to meet the leading guardian-creature. He closed the distance in the blink of an eye, and *Silence* rose in a spinning arc.

Morarg smiled behind his helmet as the curved blade opened the first of the guardians from crotch to throat. Momentum kept the chem-altered mutant stumbling forward as its body opened like an overripe fruit, belching ropes of intestine and organ matter onto the marble in a red gush. *Silence* was still moving, coming around, and the Death Guard heard the air sing as the blade cut again before the guardian could register that it had already been killed. The scythe took the creature’s head off at the neck, and it tumbled through the air to land with a wet thud.

The second guardian fired a sheeting wave of energy beams across the chamber, burning blue rods that melted stone where they touched and boiled off the grubby patina of the primarch’s battleplate.

Mortarion didn’t attempt to dodge the attack. With an arm across his face to protect himself from the beam-fire, he planted *Silence* in the ground, ramming it into the marble with enough force to keep it upright. Then he advanced directly into the assault, snatching at his own energy weapon. The Lantern almost leapt into his grip, and the primarch lit the gun, drawing a

black trench down the distance to his attacker as the beam from the giant pistol melted marble and metal before finally reaching the guardian. He carved off a leg and an arm from the creature before releasing the trigger.

Morarg inhaled the stench of burned, spoiled meat, and his smile grew. It was always an education to watch the Reaper of Men at his art.

Mortarion went to the second guardian – it was still alive, but not for long – holstering the Lantern as he walked. He gathered a great knot of the fleshy wattles around the mutant's throat and hauled it off the ground where it had fallen. With a grunt of sour disdain, the primarch pitched the creature into the sealed doors at the far end of the chamber. The collision was of such force that it shattered the guardian's body and rammed open the doors to reveal the throne room beyond.

'Who pretends to rule here?' growled Mortarion, pitching the question into the ill-lit space ahead of them. 'Present yourself.' He retrieved *Silence* from where he had left it, made another small motion with his hand, and immediately the Deathshroud were moving again, coming up to trail him through the broken doors.

Morarg took a step forward, then hesitated as a data-feed spooled past his eyes, a line of text projected on the inside of his helmet's lenses. It was an alert message, a high-priority code routed to him from an officer on board *Greenheart*. Several ships had been detected approaching Ynyx, angling to make orbit. But no arrivals were expected at this time, and to confuse the matter, the new craft were sporting the Death Guard's aura-identifier pennants.

*How is that possible? The whereabouts of all the Legion's ships are known…* The equerry stopped himself. *Well, that isn't exactly true. Not* all *our ships.* Morarg didn't dare to consider what the alternative might mean, but he did his duty and called out to his master, relaying the message.

For a moment, Morarg thought that the Reaper of Men had not heard him speak, but then his primarch gave him a sideways look. 'One matter at a time.'

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*To Laurie Goulding, without whose insight, advice and depth of knowledge this book would not have been possible.*

**A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION**

First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.
Cover illustration by Mikhail Savier.

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ISBN: 978-1-78030-786-2

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